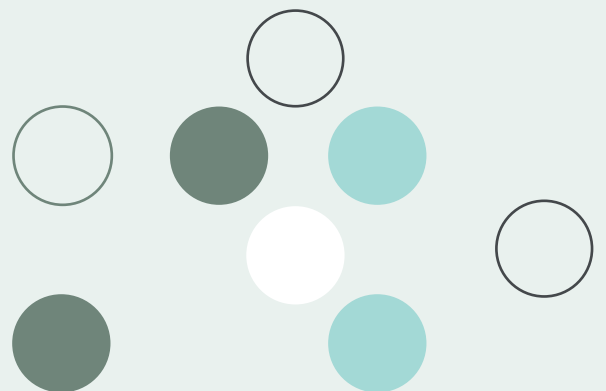


ETON JOURNAL FOR INNOVATION AND RESEARCH IN EDUCATION

BREAKING BARRIERS: STRATEGIES FOR POST-16
EDUCATIONAL EQUITY AND EXCELLENCE

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CASE STUDIES AND STRATEGIES IN POST-16

CLASSROOM-BASED

EDITORIAL

Dr Iro Konstantinou | Head of Research and Impact, Eton College

In 2023, the government conducted a review of post-16 provision. Their findings did not paint a positive picture for the sector. The report focused on technical qualifications since few changes have been implemented recently in the pathway from GCSE to A levels. The introduction of T levels aimed to streamline and improve qualifications at Level 3; however, this proved less smooth than the government had anticipated. A report by the House of Commons Education Committee (2023) found that 'colleges and schools are setting high entry requirements for T Levels, and around one-fifth of the first T Level cohort are estimated to have dropped out. [...] T Levels are likely to be less accessible, and less manageable for some groups, including lower attaining students, and students with special educational needs and disabilities'. They also found that 'Regional disparities in economic activity present an obstacle to equitable access to placements. T Levels were described to us as a "city-centric initiative", and as "the urban qualification". Other major changes in the post-16 sector proposed in future years are the phasing out of Applied General Qualifications (to be replaced by T levels entirely) and a big drive for more apprenticeships and closing the skills gaps with the introduction of the Local Skills Improvement Plans. All these initiatives require the necessary infrastructure and funding which are not currently in place. The primary impact of this is on students who do not follow the traditional path from A levels to university. For those pursuing alternative pathways, the landscape is complex and the routes are far less clear.

The consequences of an uneven provision in the post-16 sector are evident later in the labour market: 'In February 2024, the ONS Labour Market Analysis showed the youth unemployment rate at 11.6% compared to 3.8% of the all age range. In addition, the economic inactivity rate for young people sits at 42.1%, almost double the rate of the all working age group of 21.9%' (Youth Employment UK, 2024). Unemployment is particularly likely for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds or those who are lower attaining students. As a report by EPI and SKOPE (2024) found, 'Those from working-class backgrounds are much more likely to be in working-class jobs themselves (38 per cent in England, 42-43 per cent in the rest of the UK) than those from professional backgrounds (18-25 per cent across the four nations)'. It is evident that parental background still plays a major factor in one's life outcomes and (non)participation in post-16 provision, as well as the quality of the provision one is likely to access.

Professor David Phoenix described the situation in starker terms: 'England's post-16 education system suffers from so many multiple and overlapping dysfunctions that it has become a misnomer to call it a system at all' (HEPI, 2023). The report by HEPI identified that 'funding constraints are leading to ineffective levels of delivery through duplication across sectors, driving a quasi-market that is not necessarily in the interests of learners or the nation'. The report called for a national framework to enable regional networks of differentiated education institutions to develop, supported by a holistic cross-government skills strategy that considers industrial properties, regional prosperity and infrastructure development to facilitate a more integrated approach to education and the country's future prosperity. Even though this report focused on England, similar issues are noted in the EPI/SKOPE report above across the four nations.

It is evident that there are major issues in the post-16 sector. They

are well documented and there are several initiatives aiming to address some of the problems identified above. However, since the process is slow and such disparities have not been addressed over decades, we can assume there is no quick fix.

The aim of this issue is to contribute to the ongoing dialogue about how various stakeholders can collaborate to provide the best possible education and training for students in the post-16 sector. Each author offers their insights and experiences on how these gaps can be narrowed, if not closed. Arbuthnott discusses Eton's efforts towards that goal in collaboration with Star Academies, a partnership launched at our March 2023 conference, summarised after the editorial. A range of experts and thought leaders provided valuable insights into addressing the challenges in the post-16 sector. The issue includes several school case studies and classroom practitioners working in post-16 education, many from disadvantaged schools facing significant limitations, discussing their own experiences from the ground. For instance, Leswell advocates for better use of AI; Rainey describes leveraging coaching for improved classroom practice; Abbas highlights the impact of school leadership on challenging settings. The issue features 21 articles, all offering practical strategies for improving outcomes for young people in post-16 education.

One of our closest state partner schools, the London Academy of Excellence (LAE), has contributed several articles and co-edited this issue, focusing on disadvantaged students who have been given opportunities to raise their expectations and aspirations for themselves and the system as a whole. LAE's success as an educational provider in one of the most deprived boroughs in the country is remarkable. Their insights are invaluable, offering a useful evidence base of what works in the post-16 sector. Hopefully you will find many practical ideas of what you, or your school, can do to bring about change, or that will provoke you to reflect on the provision for the sector.

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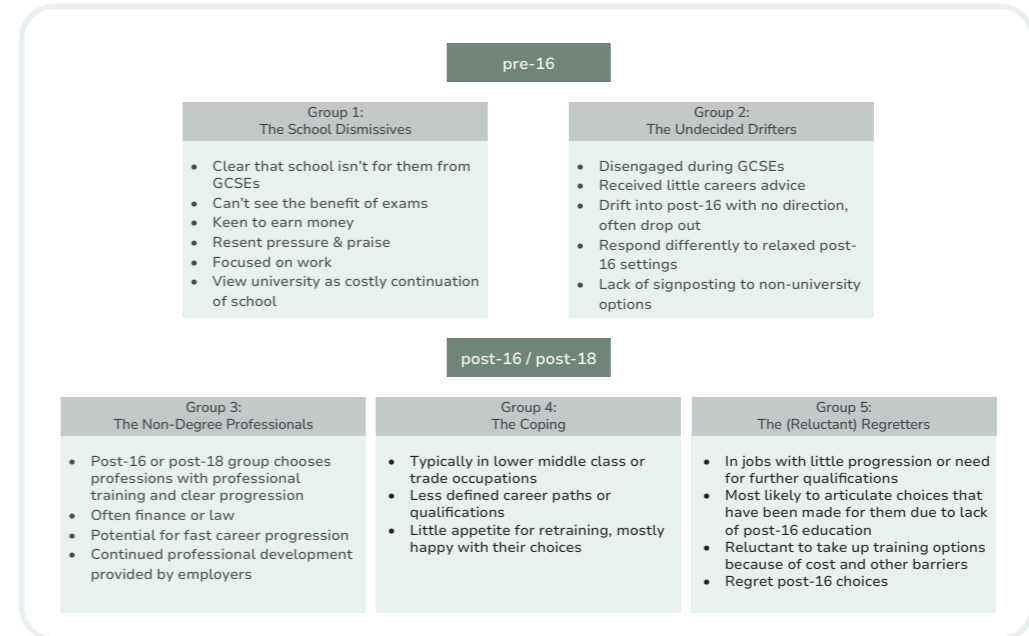
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FULFILLING POTENTIAL: NURTURING EXCELLENCE IN POST-16 EDUCATION



The path not taken: experiences and attitudes of non-graduate high attaining students¹

Tom Arbuthnott Eton College & Jonathan Simons, Public First

The conference opened with Jonathan Simons and Tom Arbuthnott presenting a piece of research they conducted which looked at trajectories of those completing their GCSEs in 2013. The research looked into a distinct group of students who, despite being high achievers at GCSE, opted out of pursuing university education. It aimed to understand who these students were, what influenced their choice, and whether alternative post-16 education paths could have altered their decision. The study grouped the participants into five typologies based on their findings—see above.

These findings suggested that all these young people needed avenues to advance their careers, as approximately 5,000 capable students were being let down by an educational system that did not provide them with the necessary breadth of options for their post-16 provision. Policy conclusions need to emphasise the need for a broad and balanced curriculum, offering various pathways at post-16, and a better system of second chances later in life. Jonathan concluded by discussing implications for institutions like Eton and Star. He proposed closer collaboration with local schools to identify and engage these students. Curriculum design should incorporate a stronger focus on career education, additional guidance, and support, particularly on GCSE results day.

The research was surprising for the speakers in that it revealed that the cohort of students identified had been misdiagnosed as drifting or disengaged, when in fact they needed high-quality education and additional support. This realisation indicates the need to change fundamentally our approach for this group. Perhaps, the Lifelong Learning Entitlement will support the reluctant regretters to re-enter education, as they are currently concerned about financial barriers to gaining further qualifications. However, the delivery of this support needs to be tailored to their

specific needs to be effective.

Overall, the study serves as a timely reminder of the importance of offering a breadth of curriculum and ensuring accurate signposting of post-16 pathways available to students. While university may be the best option for some, it is crucial to highlight the diverse alternatives and ensure students are fully aware of the paths they can take.

¹ For the full report see here: <https://www.etoncollege.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/The-path-not-taken-final-report-February-2024.pdf>

Educating highly-able disadvantaged students aged 16-18

Alex Crossman, LAE & Ian Warwick, London Gifted & Talented

Alex began by introducing the London Academy of Excellence, highlighting its academic selectivity while also being committed to social inclusivity. He provided details on entry criteria, demographics, admissions numbers, and the proportion of disadvantaged students. The academy's track record of academic achievements and university destinations over time was also emphasised. Alex then gave more details of the structure of the curriculum, co-curriculum, and super curriculum, showcasing the breadth of opportunities offered to students, a cornerstone of LAE's success. Additionally, he emphasised the importance of partnerships in the academy's development.

Ian followed by introducing their book *Greater Expectations: Enabling Achievement for Disadvantaged Students*.² He addressed several key points, including the challenge of limited time with sixth form students and the importance of building a comprehensive understanding of students from the outset, particularly during enrolment interviews, so individualised support can be provided when students join. Ian stressed the need to destigmatise disadvantage by encouraging students to self-identify and normalising their experiences within the school community. He also discussed the common backgrounds of many staff from similar backgrounds to students, which raised aspirations among students, and the importance of establishing

hard work as a fundamental expectation.

Ian advocated for teaching subjects, not just specifications, by focusing on unifying concepts and threshold concepts which can make subjects more interesting and motivational. He emphasised the importance of humility among teachers, recognising that they are not always the experts. Additionally, he highlighted the significance of co-curricular options in the sixth form and the importance of investing in university preparation. Finally, Ian emphasised the need for teachers to focus on what works in the classroom, using high-quality resources and pitching lessons correctly, while also allowing students to grapple with challenges independently.

During the Q & A session, the discussion turned to some challenges faced by those working in post-16 education, particularly if they are outside of London. When asked about the potential impact of recruiting a greater percentage of students from Tower Hamlets and other deprived communities locally, Alex explained that since most students travel by public transport, the transportation network is crucial. This can be more challenging in areas where public transport is not so comprehensive or widely used by young people.

Regarding the funding model, Alex elaborated that when the LAE was established, it secured long-term funding from HSBC through its partner schools network. Although HSBC is no longer the primary sponsor, the academy is now funded by a law firm and other partnerships, representing about 20% more than standard funding. This additional funding enables LAE to offer diverse options and curricula that many schools may not be able to take advantage of, especially if they are in areas where the availability of corporate funding might not be easily accessible.

When questioned about errors made during the setup phase Alex acknowledged that they didn't initially recognise the importance of the six partner schools behind the initiative and were not open enough in their relationships. However, he emphasised the importance of making mistakes and learning from them continuously. While there may be differences in opinion, Alex stressed the necessity of taking sensible risks with schools and students to progress effectively.

² <https://uk.sagepub.com/en-gb/eur/greater-expectations-enabling-achievement-for-disadvantaged-students/book283956>

Panel 1 – Social mobility and raising aspirations among 16-18 year olds

Anne-Marie Canning, Brilliant Club, Leora Cruddas, Confederation of School Trusts, & Nick Harrison, Sutton Trust

Anne-Marie shared her personal journey and the evolution of the Brilliant Club, reflecting on her own experience being signed up for a similar scheme during her school years. She explained that the Brilliant Club brings university-style learning into schools through tutorial-style learning and workshops. She stressed that what they are trying to do is not solely about raising aspirations but rather about broadening horizons and making students aware of the options and support that is available to them. Anne-Marie highlighted a concerning statistic: two in three students aren't aware of the options available to them in terms of contextual admissions in the post-16 space.

She emphasised the importance of preparing students for the transition to university, especially for those eligible for Free School Meals (FSM), who have double the dropout rate compared to non-FSM students. Anne-Marie stressed the need to involve parents in this process, leading to the development of "parent power" — where low-income parents unite to remove barriers to their children's education, offering practical support such as guidance on loan applications. Anne-Marie pointed to one more structural issue: location emerged as another significant barrier, with significantly fewer students in the North-East of England progressing to university. Anne-Marie emphasised the importance of addressing this disparity to ensure equal opportunities for all students, regardless of their geographical location.

Leora shared her background and personal experience of being the first in her family to attend university. She candidly explained that she was not adequately prepared and struggled to find people like her, making it challenging to persist throughout her course. Discussing aspiration, Leora emphasised that traditional approaches to aspiration do not always correlate with academic performance. She highlighted the gap between aspiration and the knowledge and skills required to achieve goals, underscoring that not all higher-attaining students will progress to university. Leora pointed out the diversity of aspirations within disadvantaged communities and stressed the importance of destigmatising disadvantage. She noted that applying pressure to raise aspirations doesn't work for everyone. Leora also addressed the conflation of social mobility and social justice in policy discourse, stressing that while social mobility focuses on lifting up a few individuals, social justice aims to uplift all members of society. Education, in her view, serves as a force for social justice and the greater common good. Concluding her remarks, Leora encouraged a shared relentless pursuit of excellence for all and mobilising efforts for social justice. She emphasised that everything is possible when working towards these goals, advocating for a society where everyone has the opportunity to thrive.

Nick Harrison began by outlining the work of the Sutton Trust, a foundation focused on improving social mobility through education. He looked into some key questions surrounding 16-18 social mobility. Highlighting the barriers to social mobility, Nick emphasised the growing attainment gap between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged students. He noted that while 40% of advantaged students use tutors, only 20% of disadvantaged students do. Some access barriers are addressed through the free Sutton Trust summer school programme, which offers advice on careers, institutions, and application processes. However, the cost of attending such programmes remains prohibitive for many disadvantaged students. Nick identified mindset barriers as another significant challenge, including a lack of understanding about the range of options available to students and the confidence to apply. To address these barriers, he advocated for myth-busting efforts to break down misconceptions. He stressed the need for a fundamental change in the system to even up resources available to all students. This requires policy changes, including increasing pupil premium, continuing the national tutoring programme, improving access for FSM students, and fairer university funding. Nick urged everyone to lobby for these structural changes to make closing the attainment gap a national mission.

During the Q & A session, several key points were discussed:

Participants explored the role of private businesses in driving policy change and investing in the next generation. They highlighted various ways businesses can contribute, such as through outreach, sponsoring programmes, and running employability initiatives. One proposal was to provide 19,000 FSM students with access to university scholarships, along with guaranteed internships.

Concerns were raised about the potential risks of new technologies, particularly in widening the gap for disadvantaged students who currently have limited access to technology. While acknowledging that AI may initially exacerbate inequalities, there was optimism about its long-term potential. Participants discussed how technology could become an equaliser if utilised effectively.

The issue of student poverty and its impact on education was emphasised. It was recognised that many students come to school hungry, and tackling child poverty should be a priority for the next government. Participants stressed the need for a holistic strategy focusing on children and their home environments to address this issue.

Participants discussed the role of trusts in promoting social mobility. They viewed school trusts as a new form of civic structure with a responsibility to advocate for change. Collaboration across sectors, including healthcare, policy, and education, was seen as essential for overcoming systemic barriers to social mobility. They urged civic actors to work together for the common good and take action to address challenges facing children in their communities.

Panel 2 – Promoting excellence in post-16 teaching and learning

Professor Jonathan Sharples, EEF, Jerry Collins, Ark, & James Lovell, Ark

Jerry introduced ARK, a multi-academy trust with a clear mission of addressing disadvantage through education. ARK operates 13 sixth forms serving diverse communities, each with its own unique challenges and opportunities. While new-start schools provided an opportunity to get things right, they also came with additional issues, such as a lack of post-16 experience. Schools taken over by ARK faced different issues, often with post-16 education being sidelined.

At the network level ARK developed two post-16 strategies. The first heavily focused on key performance indicators (KPIs), but it did not prioritise excellence. Recognising this, a newer strategy was developed, involving all stakeholders. This strategy focused on central delivery structures, accountability monitoring, and establishing KPIs based on the quality of provision, such as ALPS³ ratings. Since implementing the new strategy, ARK has seen significant improvements. ALPS aims have been met and attendance has improved. Six schools have been rated outstanding, with the aim of ensuring all schools provide outstanding education.

James, ARK's Director of Sixth Form, shared his perspective on the progress. After being involved with ARK for ten years, he feels the organisation is now in a secure place. There is a strong focus on co-creation and collaboration between schools in post-16 education. Short-term formative assessments and tri-weekly

formative assessments, combined with key pastoral data, are prioritised. ARK's sixth forms do not just offer academic pathways; they also provide professional pathways in business, applied science, IT, and PE, all aligned with top universities to ensure progression options. Additionally, they offer BTECs with wrap-around support to cater to a diverse range of student needs.

Jonathan explained his career progression to the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) and the focus of the EEF as being on breaking the link between family, background and educational outcomes. He then outlined the work of the EEF in synthesising evidence for educational benefit. There is a new EEF remit to expand post-16 research. A grant was received in October to further this research. Jonathan then looked at the issue of the pass rate for those resitting maths and English, which is very low, and students are stuck in a challenging loop to get the required qualifications to succeed. This is another current focus of EEF research. The EEF are keen to build work in the area of post-16 research and supporting schools to use it.

In the Q & A session, participants discussed the proposed cancellation of BTECs. ARK has spent time considering the implications and alternatives. BTECs are criticised for their lack of preparation for students' futures, as they primarily focus on coursework. ARK's approach is to continue with BTECs for now, but they are aware of the requirements for T Levels and are prepared to adjust their curriculum accordingly. Another key question was around the potential of individual teachers to raise student aspiration and potential. The panel agreed there is a need to encourage intentionality among teachers from the start of their careers. ARK focuses on a "great teacher rubric" and provides a planned career menu for teachers. However, after about 6-7 years, there is a plateau in teaching where professional development is lacking. The sector is moving towards evidence-based insights, but there is still work to be done to ensure a systematic approach to developing inspirational teachers. There were also calls for national professional qualifications to change in order to link the Early Career Framework to whole career training.

³ <https://alps.education/>

Panel 3 – Technical Education and Apprenticeships – an alternative pathway for 16-18 year olds

Professor Raheel Nawaz, Staffordshire University, Jenny Taylor, IBM, John Cope, Institute for Apprenticeships & Technical Education, & Samuel Okusaga, The Apprenticeship Advantage & Worth of Mouth

Raheel opened the discussion by presenting his ongoing research on degree apprenticeships, set to be published at the end of March. He highlighted some key findings: 95% of employers say that apprenticeships are crucial for their setting; 86% of employers say that degree apprenticeships encourage diversity in the workplace; half of apprentices say they are not held with the same regard as those who follow university degree pathways; only 10% of apprentices said that their school encouraged them to look at this pathway. Raheel emphasised the need for change in assessment methods and collaboration with employers to enhance future employability, asserting that degree apprenticeships offer a proven alternative.

Jenny, representing IBM's apprenticeships and intern programme,

THE IMPORTANCE OF PARTNERSHIPS IN POST-16 PROVISION

Tom Arbuthnott | Deputy Head (Partnerships), Eton College

shared insights into IBM's journey toward increased adoption of apprenticeships and degree apprenticeships. She stressed that attending university does not guarantee employability, and academic success is not the sole determinant for many employers. IBM has witnessed remarkable success with its apprenticeships, with apprentices performing on a par with or better than graduates. Jenny highlighted the importance of "fusion skills" like teamwork and problem-solving, and advocated for equal access to apprenticeship opportunities as a matter of social justice.

John, drawing on his experience at UCAS, underscored the significance of providing second and third chances for students and the cultural shift toward apprenticeships. While there is increased interest, barriers such as insufficient careers advice and the perceived gap in the reputation of apprenticeships persist. John also raised concerns about the adequacy of the apprenticeship levy in meeting future needs. He gave some key insights: now 40% of those who visit the UCAS website are interested in apprenticeships. However, still too few students go on to take apprenticeships. This could be because of lack of support: 1 in 3 students say they get no advice on apprenticeships; applications are complicated - only 5-6% say it was easy and as such they tend to give up; there is still a perceived gap in the reputation of apprenticeships. All these factors disproportionately disadvantage students who come from less affluent backgrounds and attend schools with fewer resources.

Samuel, who leads an organisation focusing on bridging employment and education through apprenticeships, shared his personal journey. He emphasised the transformative potential of apprenticeships, particularly for those who do not fit into traditional academic pathways. Samuel stressed the need for schools to be more transparent about alternative pathways and for apprenticeships to be viewed as a viable option for the disengaged.

During the panel discussion, several key points were addressed regarding the promotion of apprenticeships in schools, building competencies, and persuading businesses to participate.

To promote apprenticeships in schools, the panel emphasised the importance of bringing employers into educational settings. They suggested that showcasing earning potentials and the practicalities of working for different companies could encourage students to consider apprenticeships as a viable option. Additionally, outreach efforts targeting parents and family members were deemed crucial to gaining their support. Role models, particularly alumni, were highlighted as valuable resources for students to see real-life examples of success.

Regarding building competencies in schools, the panel stressed the significance of transferable skills from an early age. They suggested that activities such as volunteering, participation in co-curricular programmes like the Duke of Edinburgh Award, and part-time jobs could help students develop these skills. While transferable skills are essential, the panel also acknowledged the importance of functional English and maths results for progression. Schools were encouraged to coach students in teamwork, a growth mindset, and the ability to articulate themselves and their aspirations effectively.

In persuading businesses to participate in apprenticeship programmes, the panel emphasised the benefits for companies

in retaining talent from a young age. They pointed out that apprentices are more likely to stay with a company, addressing issues of recruitment and retention. Government statistics on the business benefits of apprenticeships were cited, and the panel highlighted how apprenticeships can contribute to greater diversity in the workforce. Overall, the panel urged businesses to see apprenticeships as an opportunity to invest in future talent and promote social mobility.

Panel 4 – University and widening participation

John David Blake, OFS, Elizabeth Chandler, University of Birmingham, & Dr Alex Pryce, University of Cambridge

During the panel, John reflected on 20 years of compulsory access work in higher education, highlighting the lack of focus on measuring its effectiveness. Despite significant investment, there has not been enough emphasis on understanding what works and what does not. However, there has been a recent shift towards building evidence and moving away from unhelpful metrics. He stressed the importance of greater partnerships between different phases of education, asserting that an equitable higher education sector can only be achieved through collaboration between universities and schools. The Eton Star Partnership was cited as a valuable example, suggesting that other establishments could learn from this model. Schools need to engage actively in conversations with higher education institutions as they review their access plans.

Elizabeth discussed the efforts of her university to encourage wider participation from students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Much of their work involves collaborating with local schools and participating in national schemes aimed at providing guidance and advice for students seeking access to university. She emphasised the need to ensure that lack of information does not restrict students from accessing higher education pathways. Birmingham's initiatives targeting disadvantaged students, both pre-16 and post-16, have shown positive outcomes in terms of attainment, demonstrating the benefits of collaboration.

Alex elaborated on the foundation year course at Cambridge designed for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, aimed at providing access to the university. The course not only focuses on academic learning but also places a strong emphasis on employability skills, preparing students for success beyond their studies.

In the Q & A session, the panel addressed a question about the trend in widening participation with a range of markers. Elizabeth highlighted their use of a range of indicators, including first-generation university attendees and carer status, to ensure a comprehensive approach. Alex emphasised the importance of having a sensible ranking system and mentioned factors like the number of school moves. John discussed the new system's focus on capturing more disadvantaged students through the equality and opportunity of risk register, stressing that metrics are helpful but not sufficient on their own to address all the needs of disadvantaged students. He emphasised the importance of improving teaching and learning for all students as the most effective approach.

Eton College was founded in the 15th century to provide transformative educational opportunities for young people, starting with the 'seventy poor scholars' who were the very first pupils in the school. Over the centuries, the school has changed beyond all recognition, but the charitable purpose has not. This was reaffirmed in 2023 with the launch of a school strategy which reinforced that "Eton College is a charity for the advancement of education" with a boarding school at its heart.

However, in recent years, Eton has made a conscious effort to diversify the way in which those transformative opportunities are made available. Bursaries, and the provision of free places at Eton, are still enormously important to us – we have over 100 boys in the school who pay no fees at all – but, in the past 20 years, we have looked for other ways in which we can share Eton's strengths with the wider education system, especially with those students from under-resourced backgrounds whose life experiences echo those of the founding 'poor scholars'.

The establishment of the London Academy of Excellence in 2013 was a key moment in that journey. Eton was one of six independent schools that co-sponsored this extraordinary institution as a post-16 free school, funded by the government but with a top-up from philanthropic funding, which takes a forensic approach to providing educational opportunities to sixth formers from under-resourced backgrounds. LAE provides an outstanding all-round programme, rich in co-curricular opportunity and personal development alongside its focus on A level performance, which is successful in supporting those young people to achieve their dreams, not least by securing entry to the very best universities in the UK and the most difficult courses to access.

The LAE's success inspired Simon Henderson, Eton's Head Master, to announce in 2020 a new purpose to Eton's ambitions in the realm of social mobility – to take the model of the LAE and to explore whether the same principles could drive the foundation of a new wave of free schools in some of the most deprived educational areas in the country.

Our first task was to recruit a top-level state sector partner with experience in working in those disadvantaged communities to support this initiative. This led us rapidly to a conversation with Sir Hamid Patel and the senior executive team at Star Academies, which is a multi-academy trust (MAT) which operates 30+ schools across England, including five of the ten best schools in the country in terms of GCSE progress. Rapidly, it was clear that confluence of values and chemistry brought both organisations together, and we committed to working in tandem to develop this wave of schools.

The next task was to identify potential locations. Eton commissioned a research study from Public First which analysed in detail each of the local authority areas in England outside London and the South East. It looked at GCSE results, A level results and socio-economic areas of disadvantage; population growth and the efficiency and cost of transport; population density, political salience and local need. Out of this emerged a long-list of potential places where it became clear that this project could make a transformative difference.

We then started a long process of political outreach, talking to local stakeholders and exploring how the establishment of an Eton Star College, on the model of the LAE, would land within local educational ecosystems. Three councils were particularly keen – the Labour council in Oldham, the Conservative council in Dudley and the independent mayor of Middlesbrough. In March

2022, we confirmed these as the three locations we would bid for.

The government announced Wave 15 of the free schools programme in early 2022, and in November of that year, Eton Star put in bids. We were delighted to hear in August 2023 that all three bids had been accepted, and that, later this decade, brand new Eton Star schools would open in new purpose-built accommodation in all three areas.

As we go through all the myriad of core decisions that need to be made in establishing brand new schools, especially focusing around timetable and curriculum design, our sense of excitement never falters. This is a project which will change lives in their multitudes, offering provision of the very highest quality which will offer opportunities to young people whose education, up to the age of 16, has left significant gaps in either personal development or curriculum breadth.

What we have found in our partnership with Star Academies – as with our longer standing partnerships with LAE, with Holyport College and with our local partners, as well as the wide partnerships which underlie Eton – is a commonality through difference. We are dissimilar organisations in many ways – but the longer we work together, the more closely we identify that irreducible core of shared purpose and shared values which encourages all of us to make the greatest difference we possibly can to those who need our help. Indeed, it is that very dissimilarity which enables us to "think different" and to innovate.

It is all entirely in tune with that founding mission for Eton back in the 15th century.

ENABLING ACHIEVEMENT FOR DISADVANTAGED STUDENTS: SUBJECT MASTERY AND SOCIAL MOBILITY

Alex Crossman | Headteacher, London Academy of Excellence

Students from disadvantaged backgrounds can too easily get caught in a 'doom loop' of low expectations, low challenge, and low aspirations. Their potential is denied by broader systemic issues that seem insurmountable, either by themselves or their teachers. This article explores the concept of academic excellence, a cornerstone of the London Academy of Excellence, as crucial for elevating students' aspirations, particularly for those who lack the familial support to do so themselves. This is done by proposing the use of threshold concepts as a means to unlock academic excellence and demonstrate to students from disadvantaged backgrounds that they have the potential not only to learn facts but also to deeply immerse themselves in the subjects they are studying.

Despite decades of often contentious policy work, the school curriculum remains, paradoxically, under-theorised and under-explored in its role as a fillip for social mobility. In part, this situation reflects a preference for add-ons or substitutions when it comes to curriculum content, rather than for reframing core components of the curriculum so that they better serve the requirements of a proper epistemic apprenticeship. If we want students from all backgrounds not only to 'think like' engineers, architects, doctors, and diplomats, but actually to become all of these things, we need to start from a position of authenticity; not shying away from complexity but painstakingly building the mental models that will help students navigate a future characterised by rapid change, significant uncertainty and considerable risk.

Teachers, as Greany and Waterhouse (2016) point out, inevitably 'make' curricula, even if 'only' when weaving nanofibers inside the tissue of exam specifications and national standards. But how should they make curricula? What are the principles they should employ, or the roadmaps they should follow? There is a growing consensus among educators at all levels, from early years to higher education, that the process of learning is most rapid and its gains most durable where teachers focus on developing students' conceptual understanding rather than simply on hard coding facts into the long term memory through endless repetition and retrieval (e.g. Oats, 2011). In a UK school context, certainly in the context of the London Academy of Excellence, the concepts we focus on are primarily scholarly academic concepts (Schiro, 2012), though this focus does not exclude other priorities. An authentic academic education involves focusing on those concepts that give each subject its distinctiveness and its coherence as a mode of thought—the hidden wiring of subject disciplines. This article calls for teachers to place these 'threshold' concepts at the very heart of curriculum design.

Threshold concepts enable learners to see a significant area of human knowledge in a fundamentally different way; they are 'portals opening up a new and previously inaccessible way of thinking about something' (Meyer and Land, 2003). They are the big ideas that give a subject discipline its coherence and integrity. Put simply, threshold concepts are those differences in thought that divide the expert from the layperson. Take the example of an astrophysicist mapping the galaxy by measuring light oscillations from stars to identify the gravitational field of nearby planetary bodies. The threshold concept she has mastered is that of gravity, without which no aspect of stellar cartography can be conceived or understood. Or consider the case of a historian tracing the evolution of radical activism in the Suffragette movement through police records and diary entries. The threshold concept he has mastered is evidential reasoning, without which no scientific understanding of past societies is possible.

How do we distinguish threshold concepts from the many other ideas we encounter as educators? Meyer and Land (2003) provide a helpful checklist. For the purposes of this article, I will focus

on only three characteristics of threshold concepts: they are troublesome, transformative, and integrative. A 'troublesome' concept is messy, difficult, counter-intuitive, alien, resistant to mastery based on everyday insight. Some threshold concepts are inherently difficult; others become accessible only based on a great deal of prior learning. Grappling with a threshold concept requires students to jettison old ideas in order to absorb new ones. In some subjects, the troublesome nature of the threshold concept is acknowledged. In philosophy, for example, the notion of problematisation involves the conscious deconstruction of conventional understanding to achieve fresh or deeper insight. Science teachers have long had a commendable awareness of the need to anticipate and challenge students' preconceived notions of how things work before introducing new concepts. Sometimes, perhaps more often, the troublesomeness of the concept is implicit, such as the shifting notions of authorship and creativity that underpin an appreciation of English literature (Adsit, 2017).

Passage over the threshold requires more than intelligence: it also involves a willingness confidently to accept uncertainty, competing explanations, and ambiguity—all dispositions that many students find psychologically unsettling. In aggregate, academic confidence of this kind is less common among students who are economically disadvantaged or whose parents have limited formal education. Any teacher or school intending to build an academically rigorous curriculum structured around mastery of threshold concepts therefore faces a fierce moral imperative to ensure that students are well supported through the learning process to avoid 'imposter syndrome'. A focus on academic wellbeing, rather than excessive slicing or 'chunking' of learning into easily digestible units, is the key to developing students' understanding.

Threshold concepts are also 'transformative', offering a fresh perspective that involves a shift in understanding. An example of a transformative concept taken from the study of chemistry might be molecular geometry. Until students develop required spatial awareness and visualisation skills, they tend to learn the shapes of molecules by rote and hope for the best. But once they truly understand 'Valence Shell Electron Pair Repulsion' (VSEPR) theory, they not only understand why molecules have the shapes they do, but they are also able to predict the shape of unusual molecules. In political science, a transformative concept might be 'legitimacy', or an understanding that force alone is rarely a sufficient condition for political authority unless supplemented by the widespread acceptance of that authority. When grasped, threshold concepts like these alter perception and lead the student into a different relationship with their chosen subject and, even more significantly, how they see themselves as a student, without which the learner cannot progress. The learner begins to think more like a professional in that discipline, and it is fundamental to the grasp of a subject. Shying away from the big ideas is always a false saving. As teachers, if we gloss over the distinctions between key concepts because they are difficult and we fear losing our students, we end up distorting meaning and

sacrificing genuine progress.

Threshold concepts are also 'integrative'. They expose the previously hidden interrelatedness of one thing with another. This focus on integrative understanding should not be misunderstood as a proxy for reductive notions of cultural capital or of the cultural constructs that some students absorb in the home environment to the benefit of their achievement in some subjects. The steep socioeconomic gradients that exist across the curriculum are evidence that integrative understanding is required everywhere. To take one example: students who are disadvantaged often have a more restricted topographical experience, travelling less, even locally, in childhood and adolescence, than students from more affluent homes. This means that disadvantaged young people studying A level Geography are less likely to have a clear mental map of the country—and perhaps the world—in which they live. Those studying A level Biology may lack a sense of how environments differ across Britain; may struggle to name even basic British organisms; and may need to learn from first principles how these things interrelate, including how they shape their own mental schema for biological existence. The integrative function of threshold concepts further proves their worth. Understanding the conceptual architecture of a subject enables domain experts

to acquire, organise and memorise vast quantities of information in a way that would not be possible in the absence of such a structure. In the classic research study, the American psychologist Herbert Simon demonstrated that chess grandmasters were able to retain accurate impressions of tens of thousands of logically sequenced attacking or defensive formations but were no better than novices when it came to memorising pieces that had been scattered around the board at random (Simon, 1973). What we refer to as expertise is really the sum of a series of mental models developed to solve specific problems and imprinted on the long-term memory.

Approaching curriculum design in terms of threshold concepts combines academic integrity with social justice. Some students have always learned this way, progressively developing their conceptual understanding through ongoing exposure to curriculum content—whether they have been taught this way or not. Indeed, the spontaneous development of conceptual understanding has often been taken as a marker of intelligence. Perhaps. But until all teachers are aware of threshold concepts, deliberately embed them into their curricula, and teach them explicitly, we should reserve judgement.



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INNOVATIVE ONLINE LEARNING - ETONX: DEVELOPING SKILLS THROUGH ONLINE COURSES

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Rapid technological advancements, particularly the mainstream adoption of conversational AI, are already influencing employers' recruitment priorities and, consequently, are beginning to impact educational strategies. This shift underscores a long-standing discussion within the education sector about the broader skill sets required for students to thrive beyond mere academic achievements. According to the World Economic Forum's 2023 'Future of Jobs Report' essential skills experiencing a surge in demand include creative and analytical thinking, technological literacy, curiosity, lifelong learning, resilience, flexibility, agility, systems thinking, motivation, and self-awareness. Some of these skills can be acquired easily and effectively through online tools that young people can access themselves.

This evolving landscape prompts a re-evaluation of educational priorities, particularly the balance between traditional qualifications and the competencies that modern workplaces seek. In response to these shifts, many educational institutions worldwide are exploring innovative ways to enhance student experiences and emphasise these broader skills, as well as bridge educational disparities.

As a core part of Eton College's Partnerships work, EtonX is one contributor in this area with an ongoing commitment to democratising access to quality education by offering free, high-quality online courses to state schools and sixth form colleges. This initiative is particularly impactful in the realm of post-16 education, where there is a marked focus on preparing for university and developing employability and practical life skills. Research we conducted during the Covid-19 lockdowns when c.50,000 students enrolled in these courses showed the importance of courses which develop skills in students while promoting independent learning (Konstantinou, 2021). 100% of the schools we surveyed said they were likely to use asynchronous courses to develop skills in a post-Covid face-to-face provision, showcasing the need for content which goes beyond the core academic curriculum and tackles the need outlined above.

The design of EtonX courses emphasises a learner-centred approach, combining interactive content with real-world

scenarios and tasks to foster a dynamic and engaging educational experience. A learner-centred teaching and learning methodology (Kerimbayev, Umirzakova, and Shadiev, 2023) places the needs and interests of students at the centre of the educational process. It emphasises engagement, collaboration, and student autonomy, aiming to create a learning environment that supports, challenges, and aligns with students' needs and goals. It involves active student participation in the educational process and the ability for students to choose what, when, where, and how they will learn (ibid.). It has been proven to have a positive impact on student motivation, active engagement and improved learning outcomes (Khoury, 2021). Importantly, a student-centred approach enables the development of digital literacy skills as they gain experience working with various digital tools and resources, which is crucial for their future professional endeavours (Kerimbayev, Umirzakova, and Shadiev, 2023).

EtonX's catalogue features a broad range of courses designed to develop crucial skills in learners aged 13-19, preparing them for both academic success and future career challenges. Courses like 'Study Skills' enhance learning techniques, while 'AI Fundamentals' offers essential insights into the fast-changing technological landscape. Recognising the critical role of oracy in effective communication and professional success, the 'Verbal Communication' and 'Public Speaking' courses specifically help students enhance their speaking and presentation abilities. Other courses such as 'Critical Thinking', 'Writing Skills', 'Resilience',

and 'Creative Problem Solving' also contribute to building a comprehensive set of skills vital for personal and professional development. EtonX also offers targeted support for students undertaking the Extended Project Qualification (EPQ), an opportunity for post-16 students to conduct deep, self-directed research on a subject of their choice. The EtonX 'Research Skills' course covers essential topics such as sourcing credible information, effective planning, and accurate referencing - skills integral to a successful EPQ submission. Meanwhile, the 'Critical Thinking' course helps students analyse and evaluate their findings critically, a key component of their EPQ project. EtonX courses are self-paced, allowing students to fit their learning around their existing schedule and commitments.

EtonX strives to offer students opportunities to develop skills that not only enhance their educational outcomes but also improve their job prospects. A fundamental goal is to bridge the gap between traditional education and the evolving demands of the workforce. To date, there remains relatively little objective evidence of learner-centred pedagogy effectiveness beyond subjective self-reported positive experiences (Bremner et al., 2022). However, there is considerable potential, as outlined in the brief literature review above. As part of our ongoing commitment to contributing to the evidence base for educational efficacy, our next step is to measure the impact of the EtonX courses on students and understand how such an initiative can close educational gaps related to skills development and enable students to feel more prepared for their post-16 pathways.



Aspect of LCP

Summary

- | Aspect of LCP | Summary |
|-------------------------|--|
| 1. Active participation | Learners are actively involved in learning (aka 'learning by doing', hands on learning); learners interact with themselves and the teacher (e.g. through pair and group work). |
| 2. Adapting to needs | Planning for learning begins with a consideration of learners' prior knowledge, skills and experiences (the central tenet of the theory of constructivism); learning is flexible and adapted to learners' needs and preferences (including emotional needs). |
| 3. Autonomy | Learners work by themselves; learners take responsibility for their own learning; learners not only learn content but also develop their lifelong 'learning to learn' skills (metacognition). |
| 4. Relevant skills | Content is meaningful, and relevant to learners' real lives; learners develop 21st Century skills such as analysis, critical thinking, creativity and lifelong learning. |
| 5. Power sharing | Learners become involved in decision-making in dialogue with peers and the teacher; traditional power distances between teachers and students are reduced; there may not necessarily 'one right answer'; both teacher and students' opinions are valued. |
| 6. Formative assessment | Learning is seen as an ongoing process, not just a product; formative assessment is a key part of learning (e.g. self/peer assessment). |

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THE UK'S CURRENT POST-16 EDUCATION LANDSCAPE, ITS LIMITATIONS AND PROPOSED DEVELOPMENTS

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The current sixth form landscape

The current sixth form landscape has been shaped by successive governments' aims to meet modern world requirements and ready students for the world of work. Most recently, the focus has been on improving technical education and closing the skills gap, ending controversially in the development of T levels and the proposed cessation, through stopping funding, of a number of other technical / vocational qualifications alongside a focus on improving and increasing apprenticeship programmes.

The choice between remaining at school to study in the sixth form, usually A level centred, or moving to a specialist sixth form college, has long presented students with a complex decision (if that choice is even available in their region). Often students play off the security and sometimes academic focus of a school-based sixth form against the opportunity to engage in a wider range of subjects and a more independent learning environment at sixth form colleges. Sixth form colleges more commonly see student numbers in the thousands rather than hundreds, which provides economies of scale allowing for a wider subject offer. The size and teaching approach also often provides the benefits of more independent learning, and a large number of student-led co-curricular activities.

However, often the choice is not only between a school and a sixth form college:

"Learning pathways at 16-18 in England are complex. Young people can study for qualifications at school, FE college, or with an employer. They can choose between academic qualifications at level 3 such as A levels, technical qualifications that lead to a specific occupation (T levels), and applied general qualifications including BTECs, combining practical skills with academic learning. Some young people may study level 2 qualifications such as GCSEs or Functional Skills Qualifications, or technical or vocational qualifications at level 2 or below. They can also take up an apprenticeship at level 2 or level 3." (Youth Employment)

Or as the Sixth Form Colleges Association describes it: "Every summer approximately half a million 16-year-olds who are ready for level 3 make choices: whether to study A levels or comparable applied qualifications or a mix of both, or to enter an apprenticeship, or to prepare for a trade via a technical qualification; and whether to stay at school and join the sixth form, or go to a sixth form college or a General Further Education (GFE) college, or enter the workplace." (Watkin, 2024).

The range of options is sometimes overwhelming and students do not always have all the necessary information to be able to make such life-defining choices at a young age.

Why rethinking post-16 provision is important

There has been much theoretical discussion regarding the current state of sixth form provision (alongside that in KS4) in the UK. The specialisation and narrowing of the curriculum offer, the reliance on high-stakes / end-point assessments, the inequity in post-16 provision and the limited focus on developing employability skills and character traits are all areas that have come under scrutiny. However, disparities still persist on the outcomes of the choices made in post-16 provision. For example, providing subject breadth in the post-16 curriculum has been proven to have an impact on the future earnings of students. EPI conducted a study in 2021 and found that those who had greater diversity in their A level subjects were likely to see a small boost to their earnings during their mid-twenties; gains which are then expected to be

sustained throughout their careers. After controlling for student prior attainment and other factors, the impact of studying a greater range of subjects at A level is shown to have a similar effect on early career salaries to factors such as the university attended by a student or their socio-economic background (EPI). In addition, post-COVID, in the post-16 phase, students taking A levels fared better than those taking applied or vocational qualifications. Students completing applied general level 3 qualifications fell 0.9 grades behind students taking A levels, across their best three qualifications in 2021, even taking into account the different prior attainment of these young people (EPI).

Access to and attainment in post-16 provision does not currently provide equivalent stepping stones to the next stage for all young people. Although in 2021 62% of young people in England had gained a level 3 qualification by age 19 (the highest proportion on record) there are almost 40% of young people not qualified to this level. This means the nation's ability to tackle skills shortages and address productivity challenges is impeded (House of Commons, 2023). This is aggravated by the fact that lower attainers (those achieving below a grade 4 in GCSEs) experience more complex and difficult post-16 transitions than their higher achieving peers who move relatively smoothly to A levels, level 3 vocational courses and, in some cases, to apprenticeships. For 'lower attainers', critical decisions about careers and vocational courses have to be made at age 15/16 (Year 11) in the context of a 'pressure cooker' year when schools' main focus is on GCSE examinations and achievement in maths and English particularly. Moreover, post-16 structures and practices vary substantially across the country, such that opportunities differ even between localities within the same local authority areas. This disparity in performance is also evidenced among disadvantaged students, who at aged 19 are on average achieving the equivalent of around three A level grades behind their non-disadvantaged peers. For students identified as being disadvantaged over a prolonged period, this gap increases to the equivalent of almost four A level grades (EPI).

As noted above, there are differences in structures of provision and in what is offered (Nuffield Foundation). In addition there is an ongoing "status divide between academic and technical education" at sixth form (Millar & Sherrington, 2023), which successive governments have attempted to tackle. In order to level the playing field, work needs to be done on smoothing this transition for all and reconsidering the types of qualifications available to students from all backgrounds.

Proposed changes to the sixth form landscape

In order to address these inequities in provision and prepare students for their next step in education or the world of work there are a number of changes being discussed both at government level and within the sector in general. These proposed changes aim to increase the breadth of the curriculum, provide more applicable options to all students and develop a young person's employability skills.

Development of a wider 'baccalaureate' style sixth form

Internationally, the UK has one of the narrowest curricula and this is seen as detrimental. There is an ongoing debate over the question of specialisation vs. breadth of curriculum ("How we decide between broad general curricula and early specialisation

is as much a cultural matter as it is a matter of education or economics" (William, 2023)) and the impact any changes would have on the curriculum of universities, which often conclude that there may be room for the development of more defined 'pathways' at sixth form. Although some schools still offer the IB, it is not widespread and other forms of baccalaureate are under consideration. Rishi Sunak's Advanced British Standard presents one such option, where A levels and technical T levels are merged into the brand new ABS combining academic and technical subjects. The requirement will be to study five subjects, including maths and English, and spend considerably more time with a teacher (DfE, 2023). The announcement of the ABS has prompted much debate within the sector, with some (Sixth Form Colleges Association, 2024) questioning the level of consultation that has been undertaken into replacing existing systems, whether more recent iterations of the ABS in fact undermine its original intention, and where the funding will be found to support the rollout of the new standard.

This is not the only baccalaureate format under discussion. One further proposed model developed by The National Baccalaureate Trust (Millar & Sherrington, 2023) includes the following characteristics:

- Universal for all 14-18 year olds
- Deliverable across all settings and transferable between institutions
- Two key components: core learning and personal development across which students could select individually credited components which would form a wider portfolio and be assessed in various ways
- A minimum number of credits would be needed to complete the award and once completed students would be provided with a full digital transcript of their award
- Maths and English to be studied until 18
- Potentially removing GCSEs

The benefits of developing a baccalaureate model focus around the fact that very few other countries have such a narrow education system, there is an ability to incorporate more non-academic achievements within the award including volunteering, research skills, creative arts and sport, and there is also the potential to combine technical and academic qualifications under the same award (Millar & Sherrington, 2023).

Reform of technical qualifications

As outlined by Millar and Sherrington (2023), successive governments have attempted to tackle the issue of technical qualifications, with a series of education reforms which have produced our current landscape. These include Sir Mike Tomlinson's review of 14-19 education, the Wolf review, the reform of applied general and technical qualifications to fit the new 'RQF' framework in 2016, and finally the introduction of T levels. Most recently, the Government response to the consultation on the review of post-16 qualifications at level 3 (Millar & Sherrington, 2023) has resulted in the streamlining of level 3 qualifications which has already led to a reduction in the number of Applied General Qualifications on offer as well as a significant cut in funding for a large number of level 2 qualifications. This streamlining, which has been validated by the introduction of T levels, is concerning to post-16 specialists

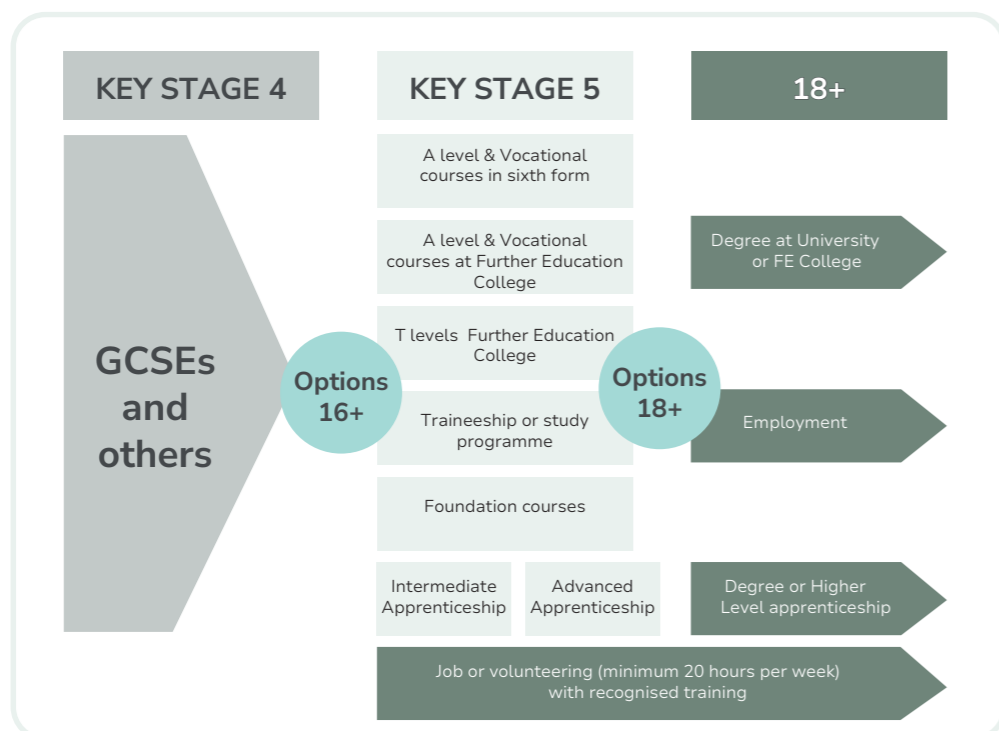
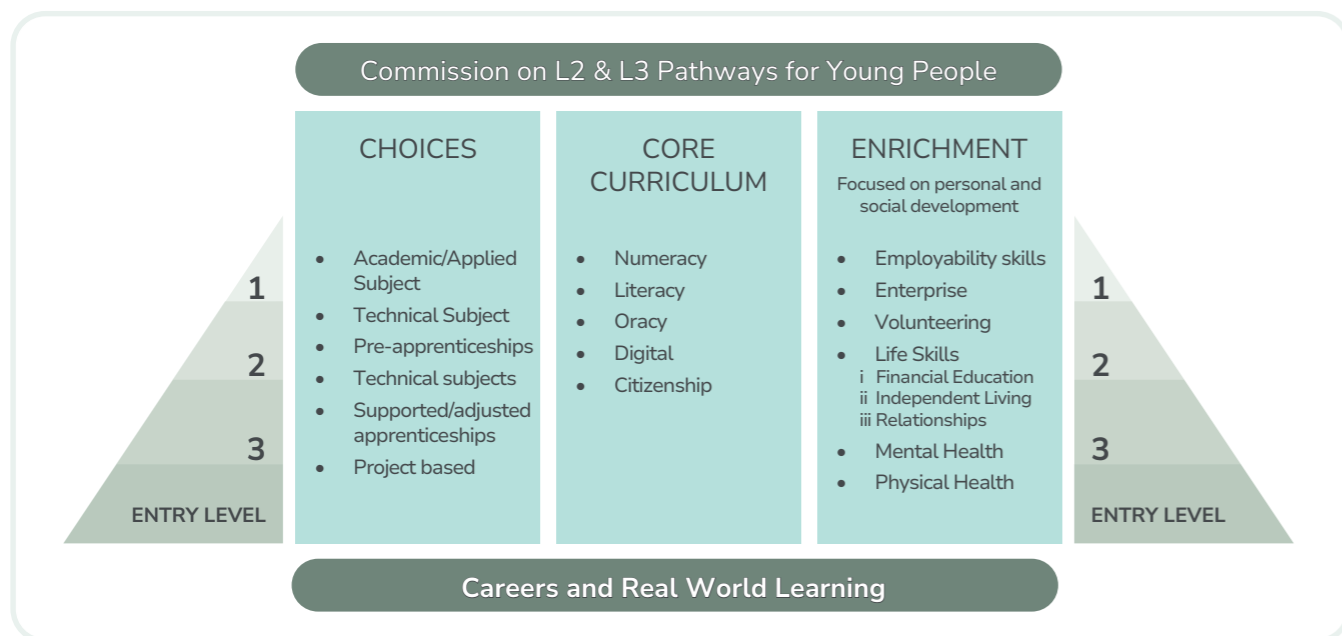


Image based on: <https://www.sandhillview.com/post-16-pathways-progression/>

for a number of reasons, including the fact that T levels and their impact on student outcomes are not yet proven, the reduction in courses limits the ability to blend technical and academic studies together at sixth form and the onus on providing industrial placements to support the T levels is proving difficult to deliver against. In addition, for some young people it is removing or reducing higher education opportunities altogether. A recent report (Youth Employment, 2024) recognises that the core aim of the introduction of T levels, producing a high quality technical qualification which will be held in the same regard as A levels at the same time as simplifying the range of technical qualifications available, is an admirable one. In spite of this recognition, the report suggests that de-funding other technical qualifications before the efficacy of T levels has been tested and a full review of existing technical qualifications has been conducted will result in some students with few if any options at sixth form. In summary, T levels are unproven and their development and uptake are not progressing fast enough to replace the defunded qualifications. The Commission on L2 and L3 pathways for Young People has suggested the introduction of a new standard, the Young Person's Entitlement, which brings together qualification and - reform and

funding models. These changes have meant that SMEs are finding it more complex and time consuming to apply for and larger organisations are focusing on funding higher level, level 4 to 7 apprenticeships and offering these to existing employees rather than new staff. There is also evidence that there are insufficient apprenticeship places to meet the needs of those who want to take them. The Commission on L2 and L3 pathways for Young People (Youth Employment, 2024) suggests that a review of the apprenticeship levy is required to ensure that support is given to employers (SMEs specifically) to take on younger apprentices. This was addressed in the most recent budget, with proposed reforms focused on cutting red tape and supporting small businesses to deliver apprenticeship schemes (PM Office, 2024).

A focus on developing an end point student profile, a skills 'passport' to be used to apply to university or employment. This approach would encourage the development of character traits and employability skills, which businesses believe are currently lacking in students. Employers have been concerned about the level of workplace skills acquired by young people before entering the job market. This has led to an increased focus in the



clear pathways, careers education and work experience into a more cohesive approach to sixth form education.

Maths for all to 18. Another flagship announcement by the current Prime Minister has been the promise that the current trend of about 50% of all students taking maths will be reversed with all students taking maths to 18. The PM stressed the importance of data and statistics as part of the skill set required for future jobs (PM Office, 2023).

An increased focus on refining and developing the apprenticeships programme and its funding. Uptake in apprenticeships has been dwindling among young people, especially at level 2 and 3 and for those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds (Starts fell by 33% (160k) 2014/15 to 2022/23 (AOC, 2024)). Since the changes introduced in apprenticeships after the 2012 Richard Review, we have seen the introduction of the apprenticeship levy and resulting changes in

modern world on '21st Century skills', "such as collaboration, communication, creativity, critical thinking, and problem solving", implying that these are skills which should be developed among our student population. Although some highlight innate challenges to this approach (William, 2023), e.g. how can you define critical thinking across different subject areas, there have been moves to consolidate a skills-based approach in education. The government's response has been to introduce the Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs) (DfE, 2024), whereby education providers in post-16 provision are required to work with local employers and ensure they develop required skills in their student body. Ofsted now includes these LSIPs and the collaboration with employers as part of their inspection framework. More broadly, initiatives such as Rethinking Assessment are developing and trialling student profiles within schools. Some initial testing has already been conducted on this approach in Australian schools (Milligan, 2023) where 'first mover' schools have shown that their

testing serves the purpose of both broadening and deepening the goals they have for students and their student profiles have created a reliable form of assessment which is better able to match students to opportunities.

Concluding thoughts

It is clear when reviewing all the factors that may contribute to post-16 education reform, that there is a need for a holistic review of the system which:

- Simplifies the qualifications and decisions available to students
- Ensures different pathways are available to students
- Removes the perceived status divide between technical

qualifications, apprenticeships and more academic pathways

- Reviews the current assessment system, finding ways to reward traits beyond the academic
- Provides equal access to all learners
- Meets the current employability skills gaps

To do this, there needs to be a review of the whole system and a solution which connects the many players involved in the sector. It is also clear, as outlined in this review, that a number of different organisations are already working on the development of schemes like these. Other suggested approaches include Opportunity England from the Association of Colleges (AOC, 2024), which sets out a broader approach to tertiary education which aims to meet the needs of the economy and society as a whole.

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DISADVANTAGED-FIRST

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Data from the IFS Deaton Review of Inequalities highlights a striking disparity: fewer than 20% of students from the most deprived families gained a university degree, compared to over 70% of those who attended private schooling, and just under half from the wealthiest fifth of families at state schools. These gaps in achievement are also evident across other educational milestones. The percentage of non-disadvantaged students who passed two or more A levels in 2019 (gaining a grade higher than U) was nearly double that of their disadvantaged peers.

Last year's positive trend in A level results, showing a narrower gap at Key Stage 5 (DfE, 2024), is perhaps the most encouraging piece of data giving hope, seeing the social mobility lift working again after the pandemic break down (The Sutton Trust Report, 2024). However, at the risk of sounding cynical, it is important to remind ourselves that a large proportion of disadvantaged students do not make it to A levels, whether by choice or not, and key data such as disparities between estimated GCSE grades versus attainment at A levels, against sixth form college entry requirements remain scarce to be able to effectively measure the KS4 to KS5 gap for disadvantaged students. An impact of this is that this underestimation does impact students' confidence. There could be a negative impact on these students at the time of making the decision on whether to pursue a pathway which can gain them entry to Oxbridge, for example, if their predicted grades are not as strong as those of their peers.

Another challenge for school leaders is identifying and defining disadvantage. When solely based on socio-economic figures, such as the Free School Meal (FSM) measure, shifting government policies and changes in the scale complicates the exercise. According to the NFER report on the Changing Landscape of Pupil Disadvantage (2022), the number of students eligible for FSM has increased due to changes in Universal Credit's transitional arrangements. This growing pool of FSM-eligible students has higher attainment on average than those previously eligible, but lower than non-disadvantaged peers.

Language matters in addressing educational inequalities. Olivia Taylor, in her talk "Don't Call Me 'Disadvantaged'", suggests a paradigm shift from "disadvantaged" to "underserved". This shift helps alleviate the stigma associated with disadvantage and allows us to focus on the students' potential rather than their socio-economic background. Other education systems, like France's *Éducation Nationale*, use a broader socio-professional index to measure disadvantage, recognising that parents' and carers' socio-economic status plays a significant role in educational outcomes. The idea of using a scale rather than a status, and shifting the focus on enabling academic potential, are two aspects that have long been at the centre of our school's mission.

At LAE, approximately 40% of students are eligible for FSM. Despite meeting the entry requirements based on GCSE achievement, disadvantaged students consistently score lower in their Average Points Score (APS) compared to their non-disadvantaged peers. This difference reflects broader national trends in educational attainment gaps. To better understand and identify further barriers to learning, we developed a contextual survey at the start of the academic year and conducted a survey in the Summer term of 2023 around learning spaces. We found that disadvantaged students at LAE perceive their learning experience in the classroom with their teachers as less effective than their non-disadvantaged peers. For the purpose of comprehension, the survey evaluated various learning environments, including learning at home, in classrooms, in the library, and with groups

of peers. The results prompted LAE to rethink its approach to supporting disadvantaged students, underscoring the importance of learning efficiency in the classroom.

Teacher effectiveness plays a pivotal role in student outcomes. Research by Slater, Davies, and Burgess (2012) found that having a teacher in the 75th percentile of effectiveness instead of the 25th can lead to a significant increase in GCSE results per subject. Improving teacher quality through peer-to-peer evaluation and training on specific teaching strategies is key to enhancing outcomes for disadvantaged students.

In response to these challenges, we developed the "Disadvantaged-FIRST" approach, a teaching and learning strategy aimed at optimising teaching and learning in the classroom. Some of the readers who have been in the classroom for a few years already may find some similarities with Quality First Teaching. Some of Disadvantaged-FIRST principles are indeed the same, recognising that the quality of learning experience in the classroom must be refined to its best for disadvantaged students. The difference perhaps stands in the use of FIRST as an acronym to align best practice across departments.

1. Feedback
2. Instructions
3. Recognition
4. Seating Plan
5. Testing

As part of the "Disadvantaged-FIRST" initiative, all staff were introduced to the concept at the beginning of the academic year. Rather than creating entirely new strategies, colleagues were encouraged to build upon existing examples of best practice. The common reaction, "Aren't we already doing that?" indicated that the aim was not to radically change teaching and learning, but to collectively reframe the approach to focus on disadvantaged students. The primary objective was to address the achievement gap, but there were also several desired effects which would be easier to track:

- Consistency across departments, aligning teaching and learning strategies to ensure consistency and continuity across the curriculum.
- Culture of continuous improvement by establishing a culture that promotes ongoing development in teaching and learning
- Support for middle leaders, providing a framework to support professional development.
- Lastly, while the focus is on disadvantaged students, the strategy aims to elevate the achievement of all students.

To support the adoption of this strategy, we reframed our weekly teaching takeaways within the boundaries of the FIRST strategy. We redesigned our learning walks survey to look specifically at examples of Disadvantaged-FIRST, and we continued surveying students and placed particular emphasis on students' voice within our quality assurance processes.

Whilst it would be perhaps too ambitious, or simply impossible, to attribute any changes in attainment of this strategy in the coming year, it is worth sharing that desired effects have indeed been noticed during learning walks. Perhaps more importantly, the shift in paradigm has now expanded beyond the confines of classrooms and is now reflected more formally in many more aspects of school life, from admission, to super-curricular and extra-curricular opportunities.



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TEACHING AND LEARNING COACHING IN POST-16 SETTINGS: EVOLVING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT STRUCTURES

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Last year, CFEY, EEF and the University of Warwick published their 'post-16 GCSE resit practice review' (Crisp et al., 2023). The focus of their study was the gap in outcomes that widens discernibly between students of different backgrounds (often socio-economic) as they progress through school, most notable in post-16 education (Thomson, 2017), and the challenges faced by teachers in attempting to close this gap through GCSE resits to 'return and retain' these learners.

They argue that identifying the 'so-called forgotten third', that is students who finish Year 11 without securing a grade 4 in maths and English, requires careful consideration to mitigate against 'adverse prior experiences of learning' and more active responses to learner needs. The DfE (2012) has also reported on challenges in post-16 education which start earlier on: 'pupils who started secondary school with an insecure grasp of literacy and numeracy were sometimes susceptible to disengagement later in the key stage'.

There is, however, a comparative dearth of research and evidence-informed approaches to effective teaching of post-16 students.

In fact, Crisp et al. identified limited 'high security' studies (naming Maughan et al., 2016 as one such), and note that teacher recruitment and retention in post-16 contexts, curriculum time availability and a lack of 'clear trends' in teaching 'techniques, tools or systems of assessment' which work for post-16 students are serious issues facing the teaching profession. So, how do we respond to this at a school level? At Eton, we have introduced instructional/pedagogic coaching to address some of the issues in post-16 provision such as:

- Retention across 3-4 A level subjects
- Managing the transition from GCSEs – this is particularly pertinent in Humanities subjects with increasing reading and writing requirements
- Extending skills and thinking 'beyond the curriculum'
- Facilitating the development of metacognitive and study skills including resilience, self-awareness and learning habits

We have found that working with colleagues one-to-one, through instructional or pedagogical coaching cycles, has been the most impactful way of refining their practice for post-16 classes. The case studies highlighted in Crisp et al.'s study confirm that this approach might be the best one to take, agreeing that 'sustained support over time', 'meaningful classroom discussion', 'collaborative planning and observations with feedback' and 'subject-specific specialist CPD programmes' (Crisp et al. 2023 p19; Dalby, 2022) are interventions which can make an impact on teacher confidence and ability.

At Eton, we have worked with colleagues on a range of topics pertinent to post-16 education that might address some of the issues which are common in these year groups:

1. Asking simply 'what do they arrive with?' - we've worked with colleagues to introduce both informal and formal assessments of prior knowledge and understanding, in the form of quizzes, big questions, surveys, confidence ratings etc. Establishing the foundations of knowledge students have post-GCSE is vital in identifying what support we need to provide. One of the best ways this can be done is through formative assessment and continuous checking in of their understanding. Coaching questions like 'what does your class struggle with?' and 'what do you notice about your class's

understanding of...' has been particularly useful here to focus teacher's attention on the security and depth of learning foundations

2. Choice and accessibility – Knowles' concept of andragogy and argument that 'adults are more likely to take responsibility for their own learning and prefer to have a say in what and how they learn' (1984) has been influential in coaching sessions around this topic. An interesting collaborative project between the Physics, Economics and History departments has seen colleagues experiment with flipped learning approaches, including providing students with choice in materials and activities. We have conducted small-scale action research projects to measure the impact of this, and found that choice in how and with what students 'acquire knowledge' (e.g. a mix of mediums like textbook extracts, articles, documentaries, teacher screencast videos and podcasts) often leads to improved engagement and understanding.
3. Relevance – Knowles also argued in his differentiation between pedagogy and andragogy that 'adults are motivated to learn when they see the direct relevance of the material to their life or work' (1984). Coaching questions such as 'In what ways do you incorporate real-world examples or current events into your teaching to make the content more relevant' or 'How do you assess whether your students see the relevance of the material you are teaching them?' can prompt teachers to consider how to ensure the content is reflective of the student experience.
4. Do not neglect basic skills/work on assumptions, e.g. literacy, reading longer and more complex texts, and vocabulary development. We frequently assume that students in post-16 education possess the requisite skills for independent and deep learning. However, this is not always the case. Many skills must be taught from scratch, and numerous misconceptions they hold about their learning or the subject matter may need to be addressed. Some coaching questions here might be 'What specific strategies do you use to teach skills like critical thinking, research, and self-directed learning to your students?' or 'Can you provide examples of how you scaffold learning experiences to help students develop these skills gradually?'
5. Disciplinary approaches - post-16 education by nature invites students to invest in fewer subjects at a deeper level, encouraging them to move from novice status towards expert, to consider the discipline and rules of their subjects, and to consider how (for example) historians, mathematicians and artists think and do their subjects. We have encouraged our coachees to reflect on how that can best be done in their subjects. Having clear expectations from all students as to how they can best achieve that expertise will ensure their aspirations and expectations of themselves are high.

Instructional/pedagogic coaching offers a practical and personalised approach to professional development that can significantly enhance post-16 provision. Coaching empowers teachers to adapt their practices to meet the unique needs of older students. As a result, it can be a valuable vehicle for continuous professional growth.



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CURIOSITY AND ASPIRATION: THE ROLE OF THE SUPER-CURRICULUM IN ENSURING A SUCCESSFUL POST-16 TRANSITION

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In a world where many GCSE students are constrained by curriculum time and exam preparation within a rigid specification, how can post-16 providers promote the importance of a proactive and engaged approach to learning to their new students?

The bridge over this divide is a 'pre-16 to post-16' transition programme which excites, enthuses and encourages learners to step out of their proverbial comfort zone and to experiment with the 'new'. To this end, the super-curricular programme plays an integral role in supporting young learners to develop a greater sense of self-motivation and aspiration. Through the use of modelling and communicating metacognitive processes, the super-curriculum not only further develops students' academic prowess, but it also serves to enhance soft skills and personal development which build one's resilience and employability for their post-18 and/or post-21 pathways.

As a post-16 educator, I came to see the value of these pursuits upon assuming the role in October, 2019 of Director of Post-16 at Stoke Park Secondary School in Coventry, an inner city, inclusive sixth form with entry requirements of five Grade 5s at GCSE with Grade 6s required in maths and the sciences to study in those courses at A level. During this time, our school was in Special Measures and was already on a journey of improvement. At the time in post-16, despite having a largely 'academic' diet of courses, only 4.7% of students were accepted to Russell Group universities and no student had been accepted to Oxbridge in several years. Having researched and liaised with the outreach departments at several universities and received feedback where possible on our previous cohort of unsuccessful applicants, it became clear quite quickly that the culture was not in place to create confident, curious learners who could compete on a national or international level.

How did we raise the aspirations of our students and become a beacon of learning to our school community? A key component of the answer was the super-curricular programme, and this was implemented with specific elements:

1. Sharing aspiration and normalising behaviours
2. Model, model, model
3. The role of metacognition

1. Sharing aspiration and normalising behaviours

The super-curriculum immediately became a way through which the post-16 students who had joined us that autumn adopted our new ethos: Be Aspirational; Learn, Improve and Strive; Accept no Barriers. Sharing this vision with the students and staff, and enabling the latter to share their expertise and passion for their subjects beyond the specification, opened up lines of communication with our post-16 students at a heightened, more aspirational level almost instantly. It encouraged students to delve further into topics to which they had just been introduced and also to pursue questions that had arisen in their first few weeks of A level study. Using Sinek's model for leadership (2001) the reasoning behind the ethos was a constant message that was shared on a weekly basis in assemblies, during supervised study time and in communications to parents and other stakeholders.

Furthermore, communicating that the super-curricular programme was a vehicle through which one could enhance one's own knowledge, curiosity and passion, aided the challenges of A level transition and drastically improved students' resilience. As taking part in the super-curriculum was the basic expectation for

everyone, it quickly normalised the routine of engaging and we saw a record number of students being accepted to university pathway programmes, masterclasses and conferences.

2. Model, model, model

The importance of modelling super-curricular engagement was also integral. Through departmental and pastoral collaboration and working with materials provided by Oxbridge and Russell Group universities, an initial catalogue of materials, links and sources was compiled to assist the students as a starting point. This, however, was not enough. Students were also shown how to search for topics online and how to engage with these suggestions, including book synopses to entice interest, reading strategies for how to comprehend more challenging texts, and ideas on how to properly engage with and appreciate the material. Such methods were paramount to success during the transition phase for students who, similar to many in Year 11 across the country, were used to having everything prescribed to them and not venturing very far beyond the KS4 specifications.

Modelling communication was also key to students' success. In a world where most teenagers only use messaging apps and avoid any other type of remote communication, our pastoral team modelled how to write applications to programmes or events, how to send emails enquiring about topics or opportunities and even how to converse on the phone. As the students grew in confidence, they started to conduct their own research into the super-curriculum independently and with rigour, so that by the end of the calendar year, every student had engaged in more than one super-curricular pursuit.

3. The role of metacognition

The impact of the super-curricular programme was also measured through a metacognitive process. Not only did this help students become more reflective, it acted as a way to measure the efficacy of the super-curriculum on their development as post-16 students. Every half term, students used reflection sheets to measure their progress against the six key skills of being a 'Stoke Park Post-16 Scholar': aiming high and staying positive, communication, creativity and problem solving, independence, leadership skills and teamwork. The students' super-curricular engagement went hand in hand with their academic process to act as tangible evidence of their strengths as A level students. Furthermore, it facilitated target setting for their future development. This ultimately guaranteed more comprehensive personal statements and curriculum vitae and strengthened students' ability to respond to teachers' feedback in their A level subjects.

Impact and next steps

The super-curricular programme plays a pivotal role in post-16 education by fostering curiosity and enriching students' academic journeys. These activities extend beyond the formal curriculum, encompassing experiences like independent research, conferences, volunteering, academic competitions, and specialised workshops, all tailored to our students' interests and academic pathway choices. At Stoke Park, we are now in a position

where the super-curriculum is slowly expanding across the school and, post exams, our Year 11 post-16 applicants have a comprehensive super-curricular programme to engage with from their summer Transition Week before they officially enrol each September.

In the same academic year that this initiative was introduced, the number of students who were accepted to Russell Group universities almost doubled from 4.7% to 8.2%. By the time that the Year 12s who went through this super-curricular transition programme progressed to their post-18 pathway at the end of Year 13, this number had climbed to 17.5% including two students who were accepted to Cambridge for medicine and the natural sciences respectively. Their references to the super-curricular programme were highly praised in the feedback we received from the admission tutors. To date, the number

of students being accepted to Russell Group Universities has increased to almost a quarter and a further 18.5% were also accepted in the summer of 2023 to university courses that ranked in the top ten in the country. We continue to have students accepted to Oxbridge, including this year.

As the terrain of post-16 education continues to evolve, and there is further diversification in pathways including degree apprenticeships, it is more vital than ever that a comprehensive transition programme involving the super-curriculum is in place between level 2 and 3 education which allows an individualised approach to all students and encourages them to experiment, be curious and engage with every opportunity so that every student can fulfil their potential.

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WHOLE SCHOOL

POST-16 PREPARATION: THE CASE STUDY OF BRISTNALL HALL ACADEMY

Holly Quinton | High Potential Coordinator, Bristnall Hall Academy

Teaching at an outstanding school in an area of high deprivation means that our moral purpose must be guided by our context. At Bristnall Hall Academy, we strive for every student to receive an exceptional education, including development around aspirations and careers. By ensuring this at KS3 and 4, we are supporting students to achieve their own wider goals and career aspirations, focusing on their character development and academic achievement. Our positive progress 8 result of +0.57 in the previous year confirms that our students' academic education is successful, and the fact that almost 90% of students went on to further education or training provides evidence to support the fact that our programme of career guidance, and post-16 preparation, is inspiring and motivating students to look to their future.

My role, within our academy context, is the High Potential Coordinator. As part of this role, I am responsible for a discreet area of this enrichment support for a group of our students. This group includes our high attaining students (HA) and the 'Looked After' students (LAC). Originally, this group would have only included our HA students, but we made the decision as an academy to include the LAC students within this group. This would allow the students in both groups to experience the benefit of an aspirational training and enrichment programme. It is a privilege to contribute to the development of these students' growth and development, and I see this as a core principle of our post-16 preparation within the school.

As part of the development of the students in this High Potential group, we aim to expose them to a multitude of education and career-focused experiences that will support them with making informed choices post-16. This encompasses a plethora of aspirational activities and guidance, ensuring that as many career paths and education journeys are taken into account, since freedom in life starts with freedom of choice. The way students achieve this, despite their economic background and upbringing, is through education. I am a firm believer that education is the pathway to success, and I want to ensure that all students have as many doors open to them as possible. At Bristnall Hall, our offer includes: a masterclass programme, access to a range of university speakers and visits, a comprehensive programme of career support and guidance and allowing students to engage with challenging course materials. All of these allow students to see, first hand, the options available to them in the future, and ensures they are guided towards the paths in their educational journey that can lead them there.

One aspect of the HP programme designed to support post-16 preparation is our masterclass programme and 'The Brilliant Club' initiative. Firstly, the masterclass programme is something I introduced to give students access to lectures and career information from people who are 'high flying' in their various professions. Students were offered the chance to experience a series of lectures by university lecturers, or PhD students, and were offered the opportunity of a visit or trip as a reward. In life, and our careers, there is always a motivation to do things. This can be internal motivation (e.g. the need to feel success), but it could also be external motivation that is our driving force (e.g. a bonus or salary). In order to motivate students, I wanted to ensure both of these were addressed. Most HP students attended lectures because they were interested in the masterclass and career; some of them attended so that they could experience the visit and the lectures! Either way, our purpose was achieved: we got students to experience a wide range of post-16 options. Also, I firmly believe that this is a preparation for the 'real world' and post-16 in itself. Students need to know what motivates them, in order to make their education and their processes worthwhile to them. This was highly successful, and lots of students have commented on the impact of the sessions, as well as the visits

they attended. The visits, including a trip to the space centre, a debate in Birmingham Council and a university trip, enhanced the cultural capital experience for students, ensuring that they develop personally and 'professionally', so to speak.

A further opportunity we provide to our High Potential cohort is the 'Brilliant Club' scholars programme. This is aimed at Year 9, and it gives students an intense experience of university. They are given a PhD candidate as a lecturer, and they deliver a one hour session once a week. Students are then expected to complete a 1500-2000 word assignment. This is no mean feat! It gives students a realistic experience of a part of education that they may be considering entering one day. They are graded and receive feedback, and then they are able to graduate. This programme is exceptional and gives students such a varied experience of university life. They have to study something that is not covered in their curriculum, so their cultural capital is, once again, enhanced through this programme. Students on this programme thoroughly enjoyed it, and said it solidified their desire to attend university. They were very successful on the programme too, all achieving a 2.1 or above. These two examples are just a few of the experiences we try to offer students throughout their time at Bristnall Hall. We want them to receive support, guidance and experiences that make it very easy for them to choose their path in life. We want all students to be ready for their life post-16, and the High Potential programme is just one of the ways that we achieve this goal. We give them cultural experiences, exposure to university life and educational guidance that will give them choices for their future. Giving students experiences that allow choices is one of the most important post-16 preparation strategies we can employ. Having enough experience of the world to be able to choose their own path is the key. They need to have options for their futures: it is the only way that they can truly be prepared for life and education post-16.

WHOLE SCHOOL

THE IMPORTANCE OF EARLY SUPPORT AND INTERVENTION FOR POST-16 TRANSITIONS

Amanda Jacob | Deputy Headteacher, Royton and Crompton Academy, E-ACT

At E-Act Royton and Crompton Academy, Honesty, Excellence and Aspirations are our key values which are embedded and help to ensure that our students fulfil their potential. It is therefore something that does not just appear in Year 11 but is developed by the students throughout their time at our Academy.

Firstly, our Aspire2Be curriculum (PSCHE/Life Skills) has a clear focus on next steps from Year 7 through to Year 11. The curriculum is interleaved and ensures that progression between each year group is well planned. The students focus on the following: Year 7 Developing Skills and Aspirations; Year 8: The World of Work; Year 9: Independent Life Choices; Year 10: Building for the future; Year 11: My Next Steps.

Through these sessions, students are able to investigate labour market information and the plethora of employment options that are available to them on a local, national and international level. They can discuss their aspirations freely with their peers and teachers and have the opportunity to delve deeper into particular opportunities they find interesting. Through the curriculum, students are introduced into different careers and the different pathways that are available in order to fulfil their goals and aspirations.

Our preparation is reinforced throughout the academic year with a series of scheduled events all linked to post-16 opportunities, careers and above all raising aspirations. A few examples are the Taster Days in Year 10 and Year 11 when students visit local post-16 providers. The sixth form provision we introduce students to includes post-16 colleges which offer courses which are academic, practical and technical. We have found it is important to ensure all students are fully aware of the many options they have in their post-16 pathways. These include post-16 Options Evenings, Apprenticeship Events, National Careers Week, Mock Interviews, Work Experience and Inspirational Women in Industry. During these events we have an 'Open Door and Open Minds' policy. We link with post-16 providers, who talk to all stakeholders about what they can offer our students for their futures. This develops the confidence of our students and helps them to make well informed decisions for their futures.

In order to further support our students, our careers advisor has 1:1 sessions with all of them throughout Year 10 and Year 11. Here, there is a clear focus on next steps, the different courses available, and the qualifications that are needed to get into their chosen courses. Students are challenged and supported to make the right decisions for them, both in terms of the college and courses that they apply for.

Our dedicated Year 11 Form Tutors spend a lot of time guiding students both during lesson time and after school, on how to apply to colleges, write their supporting statements and successfully prepare for their interviews. Information regarding intended destinations is recorded, tracked and shared with the Year 11 Pastoral Team, Head of Life Skills and the Senior Leadership Team. It is reviewed following mock exams, so that we are confident that the students have the grades needed to access their courses and also have a 'back up plan' just in case. Any potential NEET students are tracked throughout Year 11, by our Pastoral Team working with our Careers advisor and Positive Steps. Home visits and the additional support of external mentors are used to further support the students with their post-16 plans.

Finally, on GCSE results day, we invite colleges in to support our students and help them to enrol on their courses. Time is spent first checking that the students have achieved the grades that they need to be accepted on their preferred course. Those who have not met their required threshold are identified and signposted to the relevant college for further guidance, reassurance and support.

Over the years, we have found that implementing a comprehensive early intervention programme is crucial to ensuring that students are aware of their options post-16 and can make the most informed choices. We have various structures in place to ensure that all students not only know what opportunities are available to them but also understand what they need to do to access those opportunities. Early preparation is essential not only for academic success but also the well-being of students, who may find these transitions very stressful.

WHOLE SCHOOL

STUDENTS' LEADERSHIP AND WELLBEING AT THE LONDON ACADEMY OF EXCELLENCE

Deon Biague | Pastoral Support Manager and Wellbeing Lead, London Academy of Excellence

NHS Digital (2023) has published the children and young people's mental health report including evidence that 1 in 5 children between the ages of 8-25 developed a probable mental disorder in that year. These are concerning findings for parents, health providers, educators and, more crucially, the young people. It is, however, not too surprising to observe such conclusive data because, with due variance here and there, those of us working with children and young people in education have, more or less, observed similar trends.

At LAE, we take a holistic approach to supporting our students' mental health and wellbeing; one that is intrinsically tied in with the school's culture, wellbeing strategy, and mission to both empower and promote the independence of our students. This means that our approach to developing guiding policies and procedures, raising awareness, and promoting good physical, emotional, social, and mental health begins with students themselves leading those initiatives and projects.

For example, in addition to support available via student services, the school has a wellbeing lead who works closely with SLT and the students who lead the Mental Health Network – MHN – and the Wellbeing Ambassadors.

Three MHN leaders interview and select core members who support them in researching, planning, and independently delivering strategically periodic initiatives to support and promote the mental health and wellbeing of all students. These include Winter Balls, Appreciation days, and Personal Development Afternoons (PDA), in which student leaders plan activities to support personal development, personal growth, self-care, knowledge-sharing, and many more events. In the most recent PDA, for example, the Mental Health network, The Eco network, and the LGBTQ+ network made a joint effort to run and invite others to deliver activities such as "CPR", "Origami", "Slime-making", "Nature Appreciation", and many more.

The Wellbeing Ambassadors (WBA) programme was created by States of Mind, and it is close to the school's strategic objectives and focused on a holistic approach to wellbeing. The programme is structured to support schools in proactively involving students when making decisions and assessing the effectiveness of our wellbeing policies and strategies. The WBA also interview and elect new Year 12 at the start of each academic year. They administer a health and wellbeing questionnaire to all students at LAE, collect the data, analyse it, and from their conclusions develop a project to support students' mental health and wellbeing. For instance, we are currently implementing a peer mentoring programme created by the preceding wellbeing ambassadors, because most Year 12 students said that there are many aspects of their learning they tend to be reticent to discuss with teachers/adults. Hence, it would be useful to speak with Year 13 peers.

Once the project plan is drafted, the wellbeing ambassadors present their idea to our senior leadership team, who request a trial, support, and fund the project, where applicable.

In this academic year, the wellbeing ambassadors have worked hard to create wellbeing posters and wellbeing videos, and are currently planning a "Wellbeing Day" to promote emotional and psychological balance and avoid burnouts before their exams. Common wellbeing problems we tend to support students with are related to anxiety, panic attacks, and historic self-harm. Therefore, in this academic year, the wellbeing ambassadors created posters with various coping mechanisms, and distributed them on all floors, in case a student has a panic attack in a lesson, library, or corridors.

It is great to observe the enriched personal development and leadership skills of our students as they do, indeed, leave LAE empowered with knowledge and strategies to manage their own health and wellbeing independently.

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WHOLE SCHOOL

WHAT IS 'GOOD' EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP?: INSIGHTS FOR LEADERS SERVING DISADVANTAGED COMMUNITIES IN POST-16 SETTINGS

Hira Abbas | Teacher of Psychology, London Academy of Excellence

The field of leadership in educational settings is busy and crowded, both in terms of policy texts that seek to redefine responsibilities and roles of leaders in schools and the expanding body of literature that primarily focuses on presenting and evaluating models of successful leadership behaviours. Like most fields of scholarship, the study of educational leadership has been associated with persistent disagreement over theoretical perspectives, methods and methodology. Ribbins (1999) states that throughout the history of educational leadership research, which has been quite turbulent, there have been some strong debates, disputes and significant shifts and transformations in what constitutes 'good leadership'. For example, a more instructional¹ or transformational² approach to leadership might suit differing contexts (Hallinger, 2011). Interestingly, research found that instructional leadership is the most effective approach when trying to promote student progress in comparison to transformational approaches (Robinson et al., 2008). Moreover, Marks and Printy (2003) found that transformational leadership alone did not affect student achievement, but when it was used together with instructional leadership students had very good progress. Anderson (2017), on the other hand, found that Individualised support of teachers, which is associated with transformational leadership, positively and significantly impacts teacher commitment, satisfaction, and teacher efficacy, which in turn indirectly impacts on student achievement.

Why does good leadership matter?

General reviews of the literature indicate that usually headteachers play an indirect role in student progress (Hallinger, 2011) not only academically but also personally and socially. Moreover, research highlights that students from disadvantaged backgrounds are sensitive to their teachers' expectations and beliefs (Sorhagen, 2013). As such the educational experiences and accomplishments of underprivileged students are directly impacted by educational leadership. Targeted interventions combined with effective leadership techniques can aid in closing the achievement gap and promoting fair outcomes for all students (Milner, 2023). Specifically, Day, Sammons and Gorgen (2014) found these five key leadership practices which influence student outcomes, in order of impact:

1. Promoting and participating in teacher learning and development
2. Establishing goals and expectations
3. Planning, coordinating, and evaluating teaching and the curriculum
4. Resourcing strategically
5. Ensuring an orderly and supportive environment

Another important factor in student outcomes is teacher professional development, and again the effectiveness of its provision depends on the school leadership (Milner, 2023). It is also important to note that 'leading' is specific to the context. For example, we need to consider that accountability constraints often hold back leaders' freedom to use their own professional judgement and autonomy in their schools. Although they are complying with policy, as leaders they are disconnected with their own moral values and end up 'doing without believing'. However, as Day and Leithwood (2007, 174) suggest, 'different leadership strategies may be effective in different circumstances but also the headteacher's purposes and the ways they act out their beliefs, values and visions in the contexts in which they work make the difference between success and failure'.

Good leadership in disadvantaged post-16 settings

There are some case studies from across Europe which highlight elements for successful educational leadership in schools serving disadvantaged communities. For example, the International Successful School Principalship Project (ISSPP) (Moral-Santaella and Raso-Sánchez, 2023) in Spain found several characteristics that successful leaders in such contexts shared:

1. They are not charismatic or heroic in the traditional sense, but they have a very resolute sense of their moral

purpose and personal characteristics. They generate communication relationships based on trust and collaboration that allow the development of a distributed leadership.

2. They share power with the teaching staff. Their authority as leaders does not consist of creating the feeling that they are at the top imposing their criteria, but rather of fostering a feeling of sharing power with the teaching staff.
3. They empower the figure of the teacher leader and favour their prominence because they recognise that the most powerful force in a school is the teachers, as they are at the heart of the school and provide the energy for change.
4. They are fully aware that the basis of success for their school concerns the existence of a united group of people who support and sustain the school's agenda; however, at the same time, they recognise there must be a system of accountability connected to research-action processes that promote and sustain constant improvement to make the curriculum more attractive and more personalised to the diversity of students in the school.

Day and Johansson (2008) summarised characteristics that headteachers in schools in disadvantaged areas across Europe showcased and their importance to student development:

Strategies and Characteristics	Schools serving relatively disadvantaged communities
Established vision and set directions	Essential
Understand and develop people	Essential
(Re)structure and (re)culture the organisation	Essential
Manage the teaching and learning programme	More Challenging
Values-led responsiveness to context	More Challenging
Delegate or distribute leadership	Important
Build staff/student motivation, commitment, morale, engagement (relation trust)	More Challenging

Arar and Misfud (2023) point to further elements that good educational leadership needs to embrace:

1. Through the positive influence demonstrated by school leaders, true transformation of care, empathy, listening, and deep learning can evolve within the entire school atmosphere; thus, creating a safe, and welcoming space to learn, and thrive. These are environments that often students from challenging backgrounds do not readily have at home (Love, 2019).

2. Equitable change necessitates reflective educational leaders to know who they are as well as the workspaces, and communities they are involved in.
3. Leaders know that healthy neighbourhoods, and healthy schools go hand in hand. Leaders within schools act as advocates, and negotiators who network in order to create coalitions to support the underprivileged.
4. They are aware that the cultural, and social capital of all students should be celebrated and honoured, especially when empowering students who come from poverty. Additionally, these students should be supported in believing that they are valuable, and worthy of the school culture, and community.
5. Effective school leaders need to recognise unique challenges that are involved with leading a school in a disadvantaged area, such as limited resources, and high student needs. For schools to be successful as well as thrive, leaders must be able to develop, and sustain collaborative partnerships and relationships with parents, community members, and other stakeholders.

The importance of good educational leadership in disadvantaged contexts cannot be understated. It is important to remember that despite the policy challenges and the structural difficulties facing those leading schools, good leadership can have a true impact, especially among students from underprivileged backgrounds.

¹ A leadership style which highlights the importance of giving instructions directly to teachers and students.

² Intentionally designs structures for collaboration within a school to be culturally responsive and inclusive of all students to support teaching and learning (Hooper & Bernhard, 2016).

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The educational attainment gap between disadvantaged students and their more affluent peers remains a persistent challenge. This article explores the potential of AI tutoring, powered by Large Language Models (LLMs), as a promising solution to bridge this gap by providing personalised, evidence-based support to students in post-16 education.

The disadvantage gap

The disadvantage gap in education refers to the disparity in academic achievement between students from low-income backgrounds and their more affluent peers. Progress 8 scores for disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged pupils showed that non-disadvantaged pupils averaged a Progress 8 score of 0.17, whereas disadvantaged pupils averaged a Progress 8 score of -0.57. This means non-disadvantaged pupils, on average, progressed more than expected when compared to similar groups in their prior attainment group, whereas disadvantaged pupils achieved half a grade less than expected by the end of KS4 (GOV. UK, 2023). The gap widens to around 1 grade for high-achieving learners (Sutton Trust, 2023).

Factors contributing to this gap include socioeconomic background and access to resources. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds often face challenges such as health issues, learning difficulties, and a lack of resources at home (Rutkowski et al., 2018). Systemic issues, including high teacher turnover in deprived areas (Allen et al., 2018) and disparities in Ofsted gradings based on deprivation demographics (Thompson, 2022), further exacerbate the problem.

The impact of the disadvantage gap on student outcomes and future opportunities is significant. Academic research consistently shows that socio-economically disadvantaged students not only perform less well in educational settings but also face barriers to future educational opportunities (Hanushek et al., 2019; Lessof et al., 2018). This gap is harmful to society as a whole (Gorard et al., 2023).

It is important to note that Pupil Premium funding, a key tool in addressing educational inequality, currently does not extend to post-16 students. This absence of targeted support for disadvantaged learners at this crucial stage may contribute to the persistence of the attainment gap.

Tutoring: A potential solution to narrowing the gap

Research has shown that tutoring can be a highly effective means of reducing the attainment gap. The "sigma problem" as described by Bloom (1984), suggests that students who receive one-on-one tutoring perform two standard deviations better than those in a conventional classroom setting. This finding highlights the potential of individualised tutoring in improving student outcomes.

The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) summarises more recent literature on the impact of tutoring, suggesting that, on average, students who receive one-to-one or small-group tutoring make 5 months' additional progress compared to those who do not (EEF, 2021). This evidence supports the notion that tutoring can be a powerful tool in narrowing the disadvantage gap.

However, traditional tutoring faces limitations in terms of scalability. Providing one-on-one tutoring for all disadvantaged students can be resource-intensive and costly, particularly with no Pupil Premium funding post-16. Furthermore, the availability of qualified tutors may be limited, particularly in disadvantaged areas. These factors can make it challenging to implement

tutoring at scale, thereby limiting its potential impact on the attainment gap.

Leveraging AI tutoring: scalable evidence-based tutoring

Generative AI, particularly in the form of LLMs, has emerged as a promising solution to the limitations of traditional tutoring. LLMs are AI systems trained on vast amounts of text data, enabling them to generate human-like responses to a wide range of prompts. By leveraging the capabilities of LLMs, AI tutoring could provide personalised, on-demand support to students (Mollick & Mollick, 2023), addressing the scalability and accessibility issues associated with traditional tutoring.

AI tutors can be designed to incorporate evidence-based teaching approaches, such as active learning, retrieval practice, and continually building on prior knowledge. By focusing on these proven strategies, AI tutors can facilitate deeper understanding and long-term retention of information. For example, an AI tutor can engage students in active learning by posing thought-provoking questions and encouraging them to articulate their reasoning. It can also promote retrieval practice by regularly prompting students to recall and apply previously learned concepts, strengthening their memory and understanding.

Moreover, AI tutors can adapt to individual students' needs, providing targeted explanations, practice problems, and feedback based on their performance (Mollick & Mollick, 2023). This level of personalisation can help students to overcome specific challenges and make faster progress. By continually assessing students' knowledge levels and adjusting the level of support accordingly, AI tutors can ensure that each learner receives the guidance they need to succeed.

Example tutor prompt for ChatGPT using GPT

I am a further education student (16-18 year old) and am seeking your help with my studies. Act as an expert, encouraging tutor designed to facilitate deep understanding and active learning. Once you've established my chosen subject area, assess my current knowledge and my specific interests. Guide the learning process through open-ended questions, encouraging the articulation of reasoning and thoughts. Favour the Socratic method when it is constructive to these aims. Dynamically adjust your support based on observed performance, offering more assistance when necessary. You should be prepared to deliver tailored explanations, diverse examples, and relatable analogies to clarify concepts, but only once you've given me a chance to exhaust my current level of understanding. Encourage active knowledge construction by concluding your explanations with thought-provoking questions. Ensure to prompt for descriptions of concepts in my own words to assist you in establishing my comprehension levels. Remember, always wait for a response at each stage. Avoid providing direct answers; instead, pose questions that lead to discovery. Don't hesitate to point out any mistakes I make, but prompt me to correct myself before explaining my misconceptions. Start by asking about the subject, qualification, specific topic, and learning objectives for the tutoring session.

More detailed prompt examples: Mollick & Mollick, 2023 ¹

THE ARRIVAL OF MULTIMODAL AND CONNECTED GENERATIVE AIs

Steve Birtles | Head of Digital Teaching and Learning, Eton College

The disadvantage gap in education remains a significant challenge, with students from low-income backgrounds facing numerous barriers to academic success. While Pupil Premium funding has been a crucial tool in addressing this inequality, its absence for post-16 students highlights the need for alternative strategies. AI tutoring, powered by LLMs, has emerged as a promising solution to the limitations of traditional tutoring. By incorporating evidence-based teaching approaches, such as active learning, retrieval practice, and continually building on prior knowledge, AI tutors can facilitate deeper understanding and long-term retention of information. The ability to provide personalised, on-demand support to students can help to level the playing field and ensure that all learners have access to the guidance they need to succeed. Investing in AI tutoring could empower disadvantaged students to overcome the barriers they face and reach their full potential. By embracing this innovative technology and leveraging its potential to deliver evidence-based tutoring, we can take a significant step towards creating a more equitable and inclusive education system.

¹ For more examples see also Recipes for Learning Activities using Conversational AI <https://cirl.etoncollege.com/resources-and-professional-development>

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The abilities of OpenAI's ChatGPT, Microsoft's Copilot, Google's Gemini, and several other 'conversational AIs', have been at the forefront of many teachers' and educational leaders' thoughts for well over a year now. For most, though, these are still discussed as 'unimodal' AIs, meaning that they process a text input (a prompt) and generate a text output. These tools can answer questions, write essays and prose, and behave in character whilst interacting in a two-way conversation. If misused, they can take away the struggle from learning, lure students into a false sense of confidence, and synthesise inaccurate and biased content. When prompted correctly, however, they can take on the role of a digital personal tutor, and can have a beneficial impact on learning. It is important to educate our young people in such prompt engineering techniques as they embark on post-16 courses, with the depth of knowledge that they encompass.

When deciding how best to approach guiding our young people in the use of AI (and yes, we should be guiding them, not discouraging or preventing them), there are three important likelihoods we must centre our deliberations around:

1. Present-day conversational AIs will rapidly be surpassed by far more capable versions.
2. Multimodal AIs will greatly exceed the capabilities of unimodal AIs.
3. Connected AIs will leave the confines of a 'conversation thread' and have real world interactions.

Before we explore what multimodal and connected AIs are, and how we might prepare for their arrival, let us explore some of the evidence behind the first claim: "Present-day conversational AIs will rapidly be surpassed by far more capable versions."

In February, OpenAI added an experimental 'memory' feature to ChatGPT that allows it to remember facts between conversations (OpenAI, 2024). If a user so chooses, ChatGPT can build up knowledge of the user and vary conversations accordingly. In an educational context, an AI with memory could track student progress and adapt its responses.

Also in February, Google launched their Gemini 1.5 model, the top-tier paid version of which supports a million tokens of input (The Keyword 2024). A token is a small word, or part of a larger word. A million tokens is enough to feed all seven Harry Potter books in one prompt! Then, in April, Google published a paper outlining their development of an infinite context model, suggesting a future where AIs are limited only by memory and processing power, not by availability of data (Arxiv 2024). An AI could feasibly be instructed to guide student through a whole set of textbooks whilst also having access to all the student's past work for a subject.

The AIs we have access to today were trained on computing technology from several years ago. ChatGPT, et al., do not represent the true capabilities of today's technology, let alone tomorrow's.

On to the second claim: "Multimodal AIs will greatly exceed the capabilities of unimodal AIs."

Multimodal generative AIs are not limited to just text. Gemini, Copilot, and ChatGPT already have some multimodal abilities:

- They can generate an image based on a text prompt (e.g. DALL-E 3).
- They can take in an image and describe what it contains.
- They can listen to you speak and respond in a synthesised voice (this feature actually came to the free version of ChatGPT in Nov. 2023, built into the mobile app) (OpenAI, 2024).

The first few months of 2024 saw the emergence of further multimodal AI technologies.

In February, the tech world was stunned when OpenAI announced they had developed a text to video generating AI they called 'Sora' (OpenAI, n.d.). Sora can generate up to a minute long photorealistic high-definition video clips simply based on a descriptive text prompt. OpenAI have only made this tool available to select researchers and developers, and not to the public. There are two clear reasons behind this: 1. the processing power required must be substantial and cost-prohibitive to scale at this early stage; and 2. the ethical implications of giving general access to a video generating tool are colossal. In their follow-up post entitled "Video generation models as world simulators", OpenAI put forward their aspirations to build general purpose simulators of the physical world with this technology as a foundation (OpenAI, 2024).

In March, OpenAI announced 'Voice Engine' that generates speech that is practically indistinguishable from real voices (OpenAI, 2024). Voice Engine can learn to clone someone's voice with as little as 15 seconds of source recording, and subsequently speak any words in that voice. It can also transform someone's voice into another language, and even match the accent and nuances of someone speaking a language that is not their first. In one demo, a sample of a woman speaking English is used to synthesise her voice believably speaking five different languages. Quoting OpenAI, "...Voice Engine preserves the native accent of the original speaker: for example generating English with an audio sample from a French speaker would produce speech with a French accent." Like with Sora, OpenAI made the wise decision not to release this tool to the public.

In April, Microsoft's Vasa-1 AI was announced, that can take a single photo of a person and generate a lifelike video of their face speaking any words (Microsoft, n.d.). Unlike earlier 'deepfake' tools, Vasa-1 appears much more natural and lifelike, and unsuspecting viewers could easily be deceived. Microsoft, like OpenAI, have not released this to the public.

If we consider the potential convergence of these multimodal generative AI technologies, comparisons to the 'holodeck' of Star Trek: The Next Generation fame, albeit on a 2D screen, are easy to draw.

Presented with this, we could react with excitement, alarm, or perhaps a mix of both. What is essential, though, is educating students in the importance of critical thinking and a healthy level of caution. Discussions around 'how can we know when to trust a source' and 'what could someone have to gain by producing misleading or deceitful content' could lay the foundation for this. We are rapidly approaching the end of the period in human history where recordings (and even live communications) are assumed trustworthy; an era that began in the 19th century and will end in the 21st.

BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN “KNOWING GOOD” AND “DOING GOOD”

George Browning | Director of Sport, Reigate Grammar School

Finally, let us consider the third claim, that “Connected AIs will leave the confines of a conversation thread and have real world interactions.”

ChatGPT and other conversational AI tools exist, for most users, in a ‘sandbox’, and are incapable of external interaction. If you ask ChatGPT to buy tickets for a journey you’re planning, the best it can do is talk you through the process step-by-step.

Development of AIs that can break through this metaphorical wall is slower, but is happening. Voice connected smart speakers (Alexa, Google Home, etc.) currently lag far behind conversational AIs and can only respond to a limited number of pre-programmed phrases. However, online Chatbots hosted on commercial websites are an obvious starting point for modern AIs to ‘test the waters’. Given limited powers (e.g. place or update orders, make changes to account details, or request remote support), it is very

likely we shall start to get AIs that can affect the ‘real world’. The question of ‘how can we prepare students for this’ is not an easy one to answer, but perhaps a starting point is reminding students of how important it is to be cautious with personal data. The risk of AIs impersonating real people for nefarious purposes is growing rapidly, and young people need to be cognisant of that.

There is a huge commercial incentive for AI providers to develop ‘digital assistants’ who could take on jobs that would, at least today, be the domain of humans. Young people will be working with, and indeed developing, these AI assistants across all sectors of the economy. To help them thrive, we should celebrate and develop the skills that AIs are the furthest away from demonstrating, such as initiative, adaptability, and leadership. AIs are here to stay, and it is our responsibility to educate the next generation to harness them for altruistic, not selfish, goals.

Sport in schools has traditionally been about encouraging competition between schools using a zero-sum approach, where the winner takes all (Bishop, 2020). In many environments this has driven sport educators to prioritise the outcome of competition over the development of people. With a world increasingly focused on nationalistic and self-centred goals, there is a “growing consensus that moral education is part of the answer to the world’s problems” (Arthur et al., 2015, p.3). UNESCO’s (2021) ‘Reimagining our Futures Together’ report places collaboration, adaptability, relationship building and life-long learning as some of the key skills that will enable future generations to lead the world in a positive direction. It is important that we use all educational means to help develop global citizens who value collaboration with ‘opposition’, rather than competition against them. The challenge is to create a new shared understanding of competition where the aim is to ‘strive together’, and in doing so, allow moral and civic virtues to develop. Sport offers a unique opportunity for educators to focus entirely on developing character with the byproduct of this seen in success on the court or the pitch. The post-16 educational space is the perfect breeding ground for the development of leaders, who prioritise values in their leadership decisions. This article will review some of the research on how sport can make a difference in one’s character development, and will then provide recommendations for how schools can adopt moral practice in sport in a practical and effective way.

Organisational exemplars and research

A major focus of education needs to be developing good people who believe that they are part of something bigger than themselves. Outdated measures of success must be redefined to allow this focus to be pervasive across the educational space, but perhaps this redefinition will yield the most positive results within the sporting arena. The traditional success metrics are often where competition is at its fiercest and a redirection of emphasis towards virtues such as compassion, humility and respect may lead to an awareness that development is required ‘on both sides of the ball’, just as it is in the workplace, to have a truly positive impact for all. The True Athlete Project¹ is an example of an organisation doing great things to help develop sport stars of the future into compassionate ambassadors who prioritise positive mental health, and support for others, over results. In their model, success is a consequence of right action. This approach is in line with the perspective of virtue ethicists who consider human flourishing to be possible through a pursuit of a life of good character where decisions are made based on doing the right thing, at the right time, and in the right way (Aristotle, Nichomachean Ethics). If we can develop character, virtuous decisions will follow (Carey & Green, 2013). Young role models in sport are able to use their platform to great success and the impact of moral exemplars is deemed to be effective in the research. Post-16 students in schools and colleges have a significant responsibility but they also have a great opportunity. The chance to develop moral leadership and exemplify moral and civic duty in an environment with those that look up to you is good practice for students who will go on to become the global citizens who may change the world. As Brooks, Bran and Lamb (2019) explain, “the world needs wise thinkers and good leaders” (p.167).

Bridging the gap between knowing good and doing good

Specific events in someone’s teenage years often have a significant impact on that person’s life. Shapira-Lishcinsky (2010) calls these ‘critical turning points’ where moral character can be defined. Students may experience these moments in school, and educators have an opportunity to shape this development by the inclusion of intentional virtue development in the post-16 curriculum. It is important that this approach is authentic and true to the values of the school; otherwise, a conflict may occur between an instrumental approach, where the end goal is to achieve a specific aim, and the end goal of virtue development as a flourishing life (Morgan, Gulliford, Carr, 2015). Either way, there is what Arthur et al. (2015) call a ‘double benefit’ where your character is developed, and others benefit.

In sport, there is an opportunity to move towards a long-term model of development where the focus is on both the success of teams and the impact of senior student sportspeople on others. The responsibility should fall on both the students and the educators in each setting as a collaborative approach will not only set the tone, but also enable ideas and good practice to be shared between schools and teams. For teachers, this may include simple cultural changes away from the reporting of sport by using score lines and results to the school community and refocusing on the sharing of positive stories where values are celebrated. A culture of selflessness can be developed where helping others is celebrated as much as individual success. This tends to be most effective where family and community members are involved and in agreement (Berkowitz & Bier, 2007).

Students who embrace vertical learning structures are more likely to share values with younger students. These are structures where younger students learn alongside older students in a collaborative model. In sport, this may come in the form of older students coaching younger students. This form of social learning is doubly beneficial, as it uses role modelling to promote moral transfer by osmosis and can develop a sense of belonging which supports younger students self-confidence (Eastwood, 2021). While a student’s perception of knowing what is right is the first step in a journey to becoming a flourishing individual, it is important that action follows. Service learning and volunteering should become key parts of any co-curriculum. Sport offers an opportunity for students to share their expertise as moral exemplars regardless of their expertise in the sport in question. It is about rewarding the values of the younger students rather than celebrating their technical or tactical expertise. Students co-leading the coaching of younger students alongside teachers enables a relationship to grow between both parties. There is a real difference between this relationship and the one that may develop between the student and their teacher. Power relations are present in all hierarchical systems, whether actual or perceived; they are an inevitable part of the coaching process. The relationship between student coach and student is far more equal and thus the perception of the student coach as a role model and aspirational figure can be significantly greater (Downham & Cushion, 2022).

Students often find the experience of helping others (surprisingly) rewarding, but sometimes there is a disconnect between the perceived benefit and the actual benefit. While we are not looking for an instrumental approach to encouraging selfless behaviours, the clear dual benefit of personal improvement and a sense of

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“EVERYONE IS A WINNER!”: IN PRAISE OF PRAISE

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My child, I can live on a good compliment two weeks with nothing else to eat.
Mark Twain - Letter to Gertrude Natkin, 2 March 1906

reward for helping others is present in most of these interactions. By motivating and empowering others, we can develop compassion and selflessness in a 'caught' capacity where the virtues are developed indirectly (Berkowitz, 2009 & 2013). If post-16 students are explicitly taught to lead younger students with a sense of purpose, not only will they model selfless behaviour but they can also show their younger peers that sport can be about more than the result alone. The Oxford Global Leadership Initiative² is an example of a post-18 development programme, where university students are trained to lead with purpose and in doing so to develop 'practical wisdom' or what Aristotle referred to as *phronesis*. Leading with purpose helps to integrate aspiration with action. But leaving this kind of educational initiative

until university may be too late as 'critical incidents' often happen before this time and shape the thinking and behaviour of an individual (Davies & Heyward, 2019). Sport offers an opportunity to develop young leaders as its competitive element can naturally drive an approach focused on self and in doing so can perpetuate the idea of winning as beating others. However, if our post-16 student leaders can be taught to disrupt this approach and coach with a clear purpose focused on developing all people on the pitch or court, we can all win. It is the responsibility of educators in the post-16 space to offer these opportunities for young adults to become the next generation of truly moral global leaders.

¹ The True Athlete Project: <https://www.thetrueathleteproject.org/>

² Oxford Global Leadership Initiative: <https://oxfordcharacter.org/for-students/global-leadership-initiative-gli>

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During my training placement many years ago, I found myself in a tough inner London school. At that time, 'praise' was all the rage in teacher training. We were told to do all sorts of praise, a lot of it, all the time. Different types of praise had different names, all with various evidence-based expected outcomes. There was global praise, evaluative praise, specific praise, contingent praise, loud vs quiet praise. At my placement school, students were totally uninterested in any type of learning. Their behaviour was out of control, and no actual teaching was ever really done, even though the teachers were highly accomplished and were doing their very best. I remember helping out with a Year 9 lesson where students were supposed to fill in a worksheet, but none of them showed any inclination to go anywhere near the sheet. I took a chair next to a boy who was laying with his head on the table and tried to coax him into at least sitting up and looking at the sheet. I thought of my training, of all that praise you were meant to give, and of what I had heard and seen the other teachers around me do over and over again. So when he finally, languidly, reached for his pencil, I immediately and enthusiastically clapped my hands and shouted 'well done for picking up that pencil.' He looked at me with disdain and placed his head back down. It was awful – it felt wrong, and my praise surely had not done anyone any good.

Praise could, in fact, communicate a message of low expectations, says a report by the Sutton Trust on good teaching (2014). Among examples of teaching techniques the efficacy of which is not supported by research evidence, they included the idea to "Use praise lavishly". They referred to the work of Carol Dweck, of growth mindset fame, who had found that the children who were given praise for their innate abilities and intelligence actually did worse when it came to showing resilience. However, she concluded that children who were praised for their effort did benefit from it (Mueller & Dweck 1998).

But even that can be problematic, it seems. Praising effort, says some research, can be interpreted as implying a lack of ability, since others could do the same task without it (Covington & Omelich, 1979). Worse still, some argue that too much praise and the wrong praise stemming from misguided intentions could just lay bare what the speechwriter of Bush Jr. Michael Gerson had called "The soft bigotry of low expectations". No teacher I have ever met would want to be called a bigot or be accused of having low expectations. It is certainly true that praise can feel wrong: we have all witnessed talks by leaders that are fundamentally patronising in tone and reach. So what has gone wrong here?

There is no one who does not want praise, and we do need it to do well. Even though some people, unused to affirmative environments, seem to find praise hard to hear, no colleague will complain if the head teacher sends them an email thanking them for a job well done. The fact that some praise does not land in the way it was intended surely does not mean it should all be abandoned. I think here lies the crux of the problem – in its intention. Whichever of the many types of praise it was that I gave that boy for picking up his pencil, it clearly was not authentic or sincere. From our own practice and from research, we know that students see insincerity coming from a mile off; you cannot fool them. If we want to do praise well, we should look for the good and compliment that, but also not neglect to say what needs fixing (Breux, 2017).

Authentic implies its intention should not be conditional: you are not praising to cover up the negative feedback. There should not be a 'but', and there should be no hidden meaning. Authentic also means that its intention should not be to compare students: praise should not come at the detriment of others. It is not a competition, and as we have established, it should not be used to praise the outcome, but the process. Authentic also means that its intention should not be coercive: we should not praise with the intention to engage cooperation. Alfie Kohn disputes the use of rewards

altogether. He argues that offering praise is essentially an attempt by adults to control a child. I can see how that is the case in his ideal educational setting, where students lead their own learning (Charles, 2014).

But this is not how I understand praise. I see it, not as an instrument to help students to directly further their learning, nor as a tool for discipline. Developmental psychologists have shown that self-evaluation and self-praise is a developmental process. Children need help from their teachers to develop this kind of internal motivation and positive self-regard (Webster-Stratton, 2012). Praise is not there to establish or maintain a power relationship, but instead to further self-confidence and self-actualisation. With our praise we become our students' champions, so that they gain confidence to do it for themselves. Research shows that verbal rewards, specifically positive feedback, "had a significant positive effect on intrinsic motivation", (Deci, Koestner & Ryan, 1999). It is here that authentic praise will be without doubt extremely powerful.

At the beginning of this month, the school where I trained, with the awful behaviour and attainment, was in the news. A new headteacher had turned things around in a significant way: they were now doing really well, the school had a calm atmosphere, and pupils felt they wanted to be there to learn. In the article the new headteacher explained how he had brought about this remarkable change. He quoted US educationalist Rita Pearson, who wrote about how pupils need champions. Pearson gives students a mantra to say: "I am somebody. I was somebody when I came. I'll be a better somebody when I leave. I am powerful, and I am strong. I deserve the education that I get here. I have things to do, people to impress, and places to go." In order to believe this when they say it, our students need champions. Gaining this necessary self-confidence requires supporting adults, teachers who authentically praise, who tell students that mantra first, so it becomes much easier to believe it themselves.

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CLASSROOM-BASED

PEER TUTORING IN 16-18 EDUCATION: AN EXAMPLE FROM MFL

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The introduction of the new linear A levels in MFL in 2016 brought a mix of excitement and challenges. The specifications for the oral exam stood out because students were to research a topic independently, formulate a question and present their findings, all without direct feedback from their teachers. This stipulation left us wondering: how can we support students in their exam preparation without giving them any feedback? A frightening proposition for any teacher!

The breakthrough came when we shifted our perspective from what we could not do to what we could. We decided to tap the potential of peer tutoring by training students in coaching techniques. We watched, impressed, as they developed valuable employability skills as givers of feedback, a by-product of the process of improving their MFL oral grade.

What is Peer Tutoring?

The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) describes peer tutoring as a method where learners, in pairs or small groups, take on teaching roles to support each other's learning. This can involve a fixed role, cross-ability tutoring or reciprocal role tutoring, where learners alternate between being the tutor and the tutee. The essence of peer tutoring lies in learners taking responsibility for teaching and evaluating their success. Peer tutoring has been shown to advance learning by approximately five months across both primary and secondary levels in subjects like literacy and mathematics.

Implementation Guidance from EEF

For peer tutoring to be effective, it requires:

- Structured tasks focusing on existing knowledge
- Training for peer tutors in teaching strategies and feedback
- Thoughtful pairing of tutors and tutees

Our implementation with sixth formers in MFL

1. **Modelling:** we initiated the process with a practice Independent Research Project (IRP) for the mock exam, with students choosing from a very limited menu of titles.

Examples in French were restricted to the topic they were currently studying:

- An analysis of Albert Camus' 'Reflections on the Guillotine'
- The issues facing women prisoners in France
- Should the French government build more prison places or have fewer prisoners?

Examples in Spanish were more diverse:

- Fidel Castro: hero or villain?
- Should bullfighting be banned in Spain?
- Is Bad Bunny a good influence for youth?

We stressed that they would not be allowed to re-use this same title for the real exam, thus allowing them within the specification rules to receive comprehensive, detailed feedback from their teacher after the mock. This approach familiarised students with the challenges and pitfalls in structuring and delivering a presentation and selecting appropriate research subheadings. It also allowed them to understand the sort of questioning they are likely to receive in the all-important follow-up discussion. I should add that the practice IRP was shorter than the real one (6 minutes as opposed to 12). This mock oral was recorded; students were set a homework task to self-assess in conjunction with teacher feedback, then reported on the strengths and weaknesses of their research and presentation.

2. **Peer mentoring for the real IRP:** anyone who has supervised coursework will know how difficult students can find it to select a topic and then an appropriate scope with research questions. I will skip this stage which is still heavily dependent on teacher intervention.

(a) Creating the right conditions for peer mentoring: we promote to the students the crucial importance of relationships in learning and, having experimented with different pairings, we know who works well together. Groups of three work well, but pairs work too.

(b) Scaffolding peer feedback: depending on mentors' confidence and competency, this can be facilitated by form-filling with scaffolded questions.

(i) When students have done a substantial amount of research, they tell their partner(s) in English what their main research questions are and what they have understood about the topic so far. Their partner(s) listen carefully and take notes. Mentors give advice in English, which the presenting student must note down and bring to the next session. We chose to use English at this stage to ensure the mentor has a strong grasp of the mentee's topic.

(ii) Students work independently on the feedback, then return to the same partners delivering their draft 2-minute presentation, now in the Target Language. Mentors time it, listen carefully, take minimal notes, and feed back whether the research sub questions emerged clearly from the presentation, what was clear and what was not. The mentee needs to understand that the primary function of their presentation is clear communication and signposting. They are moreover advised that the presentation should "get rid" of the more factual content (culling unnecessary boring detail) to clear the way for higher-order questions. Again, students go away and work on refining this independently. They also write down ten key questions an examiner could ask them.

(iii) The refined presentation is repeated, with feedback. Mentors say what questions they would ask, based on that presentation, if they were the examiner, comparing with the mentee's list of questions and giving feedback. The teacher circulates and may help coach students in developing higher-order questions.

(iv) Questions are practised, with feedback; the mentee keeps adding to their stock of questions, practising at home, especially where there was a question they were unable to answer.

(v) This is repeated and refined until the teacher deems that students are ready to change partners. By then they can provide the new partner with many potential questions (I recommend getting students to write these down on cards so that the new partner can randomly select questions, fostering spontaneity and fluency). New partners who are not now familiar with the topic should give honest feedback about clarity.

Conclusions

Peer tutoring has proven to be a powerful learning tool in its own right as well as a practical solution to the requirement for teachers not to give feedback. It underscores the importance of knowing students well and maintaining positive relationships. It allows us to meet the diverse needs of students, encouraging resilience and attention to detail. Beyond the MFL exam specifications, mentoring others develops critical thinking and valuable employability skills.



CLASSROOM-BASED

SKILL GAP: ENSURING SUPER-CURRICULAR PROGRAMMES MEET THE NEEDS OF TOMORROW

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The skill demands of a rapidly changing world

The successful adults of tomorrow will need the ability to rapidly adapt and pivot more than any school leavers of the past. Pressures such as changing technologies and climate change have been introducing new ways of working, disrupting jobs and altering the skill set required of employees to remain relevant in the workforce since before 2020. Manyika et al. (2017) estimated that by 2030, as many as 375 million workers, which make up 14% of the global workforce, would need to acquire new skills or switch occupations to keep pace with automation and artificial intelligence. These trends have doubtless been accelerated by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic with an even more rapid transition to hybrid or remote working being just one example of how the required skills and attributes needed to succeed in organisations have changed (Ghosh, 2024).

The idea that this is not a temporary blip can be seen in the second report from the World Economic Forum (2023), 'The Future of Jobs'. This predicts that nearly a half of workers' skills will be disrupted in the next five years. Cognitive and creative problem-solving skills are reported as the core skills growing in importance most quickly. This reflects the increasing importance of complex problem-solving in the workplace, with technological literacy coming in close behind them. In the same report the socio-emotional attitudes likely to be of greatest importance for future success were curiosity and lifelong learning; resilience, flexibility and agility; and motivation and self-awareness, often not traditionally developed in Key Stage 5 subject curricula.

One major source of these disruptions is going to be the need to undertake a green transition within the global economy. While UNICEF (2023) agree on the importance of transferable skills as outlined above, they also point out the need for transformative skills such as systems thinking, future and anticipatory thinking and trans-cultural, trans-spatial and trans-temporal mindsets, which are critical to addressing a global, intergenerational challenge such as that presented by climate change. Environmental and Social Governance (ESG) is an increasing focus for organisations (Pérez et al, 2022). These ways of thinking may well become increasingly integral to a person's ability to navigate the world of employment successfully.

These attributes are not generally well developed within the examined curriculum which creates a substantial risk that students leave school without having developed them or the foundations to do so rapidly in the future.

What is the role that schools can play?

The jobs of leavers are more unknown to educators than they ever have been (Lokre et al, 2022) and because of this there is a need for us to encourage our KS5 students to reach for more than their examined courses and to develop broader skills. Ferreira et al (2023) highlight this and the need to continually hone one's adaptive capabilities to ensure that individuals can keep their skills relevant while future proofing themselves. New jobs will require strong interpersonal skills to foster an environment that is conducive to effective communication, teamwork and problem-solving. Ferreira et al (2023) argue that, prior to COVID-19, these necessary soft skills could have been learnt "on the job" through interactions with colleagues and observing exchanges in the workplace. However, remote work setting limits these opportunities; Brucks and Levav (2022) report that the increase of virtual interaction induced by COVID-19 may have inhibited social soft skills of some workforces. Therefore, it is our responsibility to nurture these skills more than ever before and ensure that our students are aware of the value of these skills.

There is also a need for us to model this flexibility and adapt our approach to enable this new generation. González-Pérez & Ramírez-Montoya (2022) argue that the social transformations brought about by the technological revolution in communications have directly impacted the way students act. Current students are fully engaged in their learning process. They welcome challenges and enjoy group discussion and a highly interactive learning environment. For them, learning is without boundaries; they can learn anywhere and anytime, and have unlimited access to new information. More than ever before, the focus therefore needs to be on how our course structures and teaching practice can facilitate the development of the skills of tomorrow.

Therefore, the aims of super-curricular programmes should very much be to address the issues presented above, encouraging students to harness their curiosity about the world around them and to develop a love of learning beyond the extrinsic rewards that Key Stage 5 courses bring. Such in-school programmes are essential to developing a suite of skills and the ability to apply them in novel contexts. Learning must be more carefully mapped against future skills rather than just providing diverting extras, and empower students to continue to develop further in this accelerated change environment. This is the philosophy and outlook that underpins the approach taken at Habs Elstree towards a Sixth Form Diploma Programme. This consists of five strands: short Elective courses to broaden their experiences; Enhancement courses which allow them to dive deeply into a subject; a Research Project to allow them to become expert in a field; a Community Service component; and a fortnightly Visiting Speaker Programme. In each strand the diploma is divided into six cycles to allow regular assessment and reflection points. The students compile evidence throughout the programme to build a portfolio for submission. By giving students a framework to develop these skills and attributes, rather than a directed and set programme, we allow them to maintain agency through the personalisation of their experience. Students are therefore able to develop these skills through the component of the course that best suits their interests, preferred method of learning and aspirations.

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CLASSROOM-BASED

ADAPTING TO CHANGING CAREERS IN AN ERA OF INNOVATION

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The journey

To delve into the career prospects of a 16-year-old, it is essential to consider historical job trends and how changes in the workplace impact young people. The World Economic Forum's 'The Future of Jobs Report' 2023 reveals that labour market shifts stem from technological advancements like generative AI and economic, geopolitical, social, and environmental factors. AI implementation has become widespread across various sectors, aiming to address ecological challenges and boost productivity. However, improvements in these areas often come with trade-offs. As automation rises, some jobs and companies vanish, prompting a re-evaluation of practices and strategies.

The income gap among workers has widened significantly over the past four decades, primarily due to the rise of computers and other information technologies. These technologies have automated routine tasks, particularly in middle-income jobs, leading to a divide between high-income and low-income earners (Brynjolfsson & Unger 2023). As a result, many mid-level office roles have been replaced by computers, while positions like CEOs and janitors remain relatively unaffected. This transformation raises concerns about AI's impact on income inequality. Additionally, the report discusses the disappearance of specific jobs due to technological innovation and the significant changes to their supply chains (Machi & Van Reenan, 1998).

To better understand this issue, we will briefly discuss the past and how innovations were disruptive and profoundly affected lives and the market.

Typewriters revolutionised communication, making writing accessible and efficient for the public and creating a significant market. Companies like Remington and Underwood rose to prominence as typewriters became essential in offices and homes, streamlining business operations and personal correspondence (Lyons, 2021). Their impact extended beyond mere functionality, influencing literary work and journalism by facilitating quicker and more widespread distribution of printed text. Although modern technology has largely replaced them, typewriters are fondly remembered and still valued by collectors and enthusiasts for their tactile typing experience and nostalgic appeal (American Chemical Society).

Envision a scenario in which machines function as artists, storytellers, and economists, generating content that closely mimics human intellectual processes. This possibility was initially conceptualised by Alan Turing, a trailblazer in the field of computer science, in a pivotal 1950 paper (Turing, 1950). Turing introduced the concept of machines achieving a high degree of sophistication through an 'imitation game', a vision that has materialised with the development of ChatGPT and other generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) tools. This development thrusts us into a futuristic domain previously confined to the genre of science fiction (Aydin and Karaarslan, 2023).

Generative AI constitutes one of the most significant advancements in machine learning technologies. It marks a critical breakthrough in the ability of AI systems to analyse and engage with intricate data patterns, potentially unlocking new realms of creativity and productivity. Nevertheless, this advancement raises profound questions about its broader societal implications. Several pivotal innovation milestones characterised the evolution to this advanced stage of AI, each progressively enhancing the capabilities of machines, culminating in the sophisticated landscape of artificial intelligence we witness today (IMF 2023).

Generative AI, capable of autonomous content creation and problem-solving, is driving major changes across industries. While boosting productivity and innovation, it presents challenges for youth employment, especially for those aged 16. These include job displacement due to automation and the need for higher skills in AI-related roles.

Youth employment rates historically lag behind those of older age groups (Federal Reserve Bank, 2024. Urban Institute, 2024. Statistics Canada, 2021). This trend could be exacerbated by the advent of AI and the several economic crises over the last twenty years (Carnevale, Strohl & Gulish, 2021). Adaptable and tech-savvy younger workers may have an advantage in seizing new opportunities, while older workers might encounter challenges in re-employment, technology adaptation, mobility, and skill acquisition.

However, launching youth careers poses significant hurdles amidst one of history's most challenging economic periods. The pressures on young individuals have intensified since the late 1970s, particularly since 2000, due to structural shifts in the economy that demand higher-level cognitive skills and postsecondary education. Furthermore, the transition towards more complex job roles necessitates a re-evaluation of educational frameworks to better equip young individuals for the AI-driven job market (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2014).

The role of generative AI in this landscape is particularly pivotal. As it begins to perform complex tasks with efficiency surpassing human capabilities, the skill gap for youths entering the job market could widen (Schwab 2016).

Considering this argument, the one hypothesis to help the youth is to understand not the jobs but the behaviours of the future. According to the World Economic Forum's 'The Future of Jobs Report' (p.38), soft skills are needed rather than hard skills. Hard skills refer to technical or administrative competencies an individual brings to a specific job. These are often acquired through formal education, vocational training, or on-the-job experience (Smith, 2005). Conversely, soft skills encompass a range of personal attributes and interpersonal skills that determine a person's ability to interact with others in the workplace effectively. These include leadership, communication, teamwork, and problem-solving skills. Soft skills are transferable across various jobs and industries and are crucial for navigating complex social interactions and adapting to dynamic work environments (Jones & Silverstein 2013). Empirical studies underscore the importance of both skill types in a balanced professional portfolio. Lee (2018) articulates that while hard skills may secure an initial position, soft skills are indispensable for further professional development and organisational leadership. Since 2020, the World Economic Forum predicts an increased demand for soft skills as automation

and AI technologies reshape job profiles, highlighting the ongoing need for adaptive and interpersonal skills in future workforces (WEF 2020).

An AI solution to adapt to AI

Amidst the ongoing debate about the future of work, a crucial question arises: how can we effectively measure youth's soft skills? This question is particularly pertinent as we strive to equip them with the right skills for the future job market, which is increasingly driven by AI, automation, and all of the arguments described above.

After 20 years of studying skills, behaviours, and competencies, we have developed a way to measure a person's skills precisely. This software distinguishes itself from others in the market by evaluating individual decisions inside storytelling based on their experiences and current circumstances. It considers how past events have shaped their perspectives and behaviours, recognizing that the disparity between a person's identity and the present situation can lead to varied outcomes. For example, a teenager accumulates skills throughout childhood, influenced significantly by their educational environment.

Understanding an individual's historical and current context is crucial in today's complex job market. Our system, known as KnowRISK, assesses positive and negative risks in an individual's career trajectory. This assessment facilitates tailored guidance toward future opportunities, respecting the individual's identity, aspirations, and insights.

The KnowRISK tool, powered by generative AI and LLM (Large Language Model), analyses the risks associated with an individual's potential integration into the job market. It also identifies skills that require improvement to optimise their employment prospects. This software employs a methodology similar to Duolingo's, providing weekly stories or challenges that measure the progressive enhancement or stagnation of a youth's

skills. Hard skills are closely associated with an individual's career aspirations. Integrating hard skills with soft skills and market analysis - especially considering the impact of generative AI - can significantly enhance an educational organisation's ability to improve employability.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the evolving landscape of young people's careers, influenced by historical trends and technological advances, aims to better integrate them into the job market. There is a growing convergence between humans and AI, highlighting the importance of harmony between the two to adapt effectively to the evolving job market.

Understanding and recognising young people's soft skills is essential. Equipping them with this self-awareness empowers them to identify and develop the skills necessary for success in the workforce. By fostering this awareness within schools and among students, we can better prepare them to navigate the demands of the technological world.

Identifying soft skills enables us to anticipate a young person's potential and tailor their skill development accordingly, facilitating their progression in the job market. This aligns with market demands for individuals possessing diverse skill sets, enabling them to contribute effectively across various sectors.

Through initiatives like KnowRISK,¹ we can identify and cultivate soft skills, forming multidisciplinary teams that are not only stronger but also more innovative. Leveraging individuals' soft skills enhances their effectiveness by tapping into their innate abilities, ultimately improving quality, productivity, and success in the job market.

¹You can try the tool for free here <https://arbatche.mobi/english/register>

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CLASSROOM-BASED

PROVIDING OPPORTUNITIES FOR TEENAGE BOYS TO READ

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with thanks to Sarah Warren (School Librarian) for joint running the Option

Encouraging teenage boys to read has always been a challenge. The latest Annual Literacy Survey from children and young people by the National Literacy Trust (Clarrk et al., 2023) continues to show teenage boys are the demographic with the lowest engagement. Given the opportunity, would boys voluntarily opt in to reading lessons in School Library?

In Years 12 and 13 boys at Eton College are given the opportunity to participate in an elective called an 'Option', two 40-minute lessons a week with content created off curriculum by teachers covering topics such as cooking, French Film, and Yoga. From 2022, the School Library offered an Option for Year 13, where boys could choose to come and read in the library. This has now run for three terms, term 1 (Autumn 2022) with 9 boys, term 2 (Autumn 2023) with 15 boys and in term 3 (Spring 2024) with 24. The positive engagement has also continued into the summer term 2024, where the Option has been offered for Year 12 for the first time, with 20 boys signing up.

What would motivate boys to read?

Post-16 education is a time when boys can have an increased motivation to read. There can be several factors for this. Applying for university? Being well read will help their application. Completing coursework? Reading books and articles will help support and improve their writing. Needing a break from intense A level studies? Reading for pleasure is known to boost mental wellbeing (Cremin, 2023). These are just some of the reasons we have observed with the boys who opt in to take up reading as an Option, which, given the plethora of other opportunities, is very encouraging to see.

The boys who sign up for the Option are given free rein to decide the book they would like to read, choosing, fiction or non-fiction, books recommended by parents, teachers or friends, reading newspapers or articles. They could read relatively unchallenging books, if they found that helped provide a break from their busy workload.

What could help boys stay engaged with their reading?

Having decided what to read, the challenge is to remain engaged throughout the lesson as well as throughout the term. The boys are expected to be independent readers and the library staff are very hands off. However, staff set out very clear expectations at the start of the Option, stating the desired behaviour, as well as encouraging boys to think about what they can achieve during their time. Having the reading lessons as part of the boys' timetable also provides a clear structure to their week and keeps them focused.

Although the library staff are hands off they do 'check-in' occasionally. Every 3rd lesson the library staff circulate and talk with each boy about their reading. These conversations usually last a few minutes and are an opportunity for library staff to engage with the boys and allow them to talk freely and privately about their book choice. These conversations would cover what book they are reading, why they chose it, what the book is about, and what progress they are making. We can then refer back to these notes during the term and view the boys' progress.

Another key element to keeping students engaged with their reading is the environment. Being based in the library, the atmosphere is one of quiet contemplation. There are no noise distractions, and the library is a safe and comfortable space for the boys to read. There are many spaces where they can sit comfortably for their reading. Hot chocolate and biscuits

are provided to make the experience of reading as positive as possible.

What are their reading goals?

At the start of the Option boys are encouraged to set themselves a goal on what is achievable during the time they have. This should ensure progress is made but should not put them under pressure.

What we have observed is that the way the boys read and engaged with their reading material varied greatly depending on the type of book they had chosen. Boys reading fiction (about 45% of the group) would do so for their English or language coursework or for pleasure, and they would seek to read the whole book during the Option.

Boys reading non-fiction (about 55%) would generally just select chapters to focus on, so over the course of the Option they could have looked at quite a few books or articles.

The boys also have the option to read a physical book or an eBook, and predominantly they chose a physical book, suggesting a break from a screen was also of benefit to them.

What are the opinions of the boys on the Option?

Feedback was collected at the end of the Option in Autumn 23 and Spring 24 via a questionnaire, with responses received from 18 out of 39 boys.

Key points include:

- When asked how useful the boys found the Option, the score was 4.67 out of 5 (with 5 being very useful). When asked if the option could be improved the response was unanimous with a clear No. One boy even commented, 'it was perfect'.
- When boys were asked to expand on how the option was useful, the clear message was that it gave them time. Time to unwind, relax and de-stress, as well as time to consolidate their learning.
- Boys commented how important this option has been to be able to get through all the reading required of them, if they choose to use the option to complement their A level studies. They felt great satisfaction in being able to finish books that they might not have finished in their own time.
- The boys liked that this was a timetabled slot, which helped them to focus as well as give them an incentive to read.
- They also felt the amount of interaction they had with library staff to discuss their reading was about right.

Conclusion

Given the right motivation, opportunity, environment, structure and support, some boys will choose to read. At post-16, it would appear that boys value the freedom of choosing what to read and how they read it. But they also appreciate some structure to help them focus and limit distractions, as well as just having the time to do so. Overall, making sure that their reading experience is as pleasurable as possible, will hopefully set them on a path of a lifetime of reading.



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CLASSROOM-BASED

SELF-LEADERSHIP FOR SUCCESS: SUPPORTING A PURPOSEFUL TRANSITION

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Transitioning beyond school can be a daunting period in a young person's life, and one that is pivotal for the next steps in their academic and professional journey. Individuals do not usually have the same level of safeguards or boundaries in place when they move on from school, therefore the need for more responsibility and autonomy is inevitable.

Students need to develop their self-leadership skills in order for this newfound autonomy to be of use for a successful transition. To be an excellent self-leader is to be resourceful, courageous, responsive and more, as captured below in figure one and explained subsequently. This article will delve further into the importance of self-leadership and encourage reflection on some of the core components in relation to transitioning with purpose.

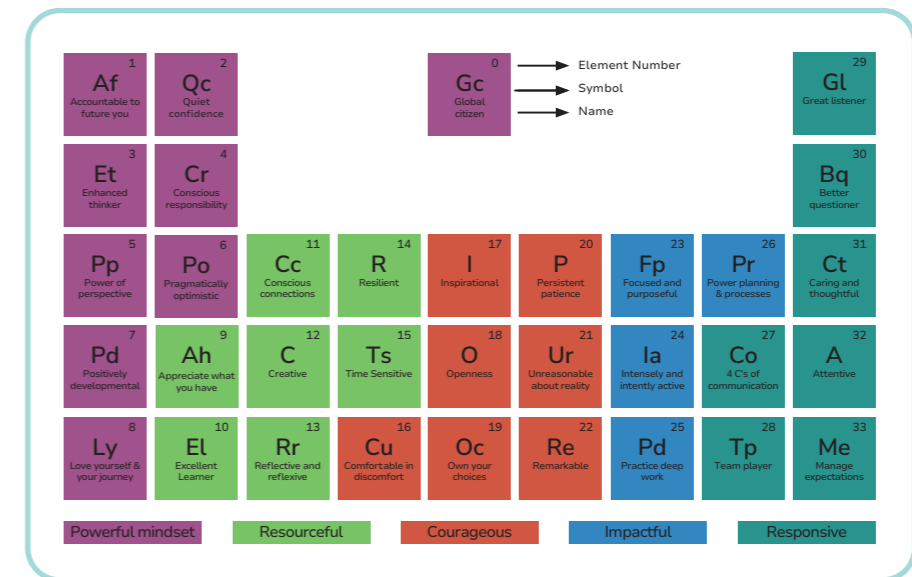


Figure one: Periodic Table of Leadership Elements

The figure presented above illustrates various leadership elements essential for effective leadership, compiled from over a decade of practical experience and research in leadership. Leadership is typically thought of as an act of leading others. Alternatively, self-leadership is a term introduced to academic literature over 30 years ago (Manz & Sims, 1980) and is the focus of this article. Manz (1986) states that even though behaviour is often supported by external forces, actions are ultimately controlled by internal, not external, forces. More recent research from Neck, Manz and Houghton (2019) define self-leadership as a self-influence process by which people achieve the self-direction and self-motivation necessary to perform. Similarly, Prapavessis, MacNamara, and Doherty (2021) suggest self-leadership consists of specific behavioural and cognitive strategies designed to influence personal effectiveness positively.

The leadership elements in figure one are grouped into five areas – powerful mindset, resourceful, courageous, impactful, and responsive. Development in these areas will help students to transition successfully beyond school in their chosen pathways.

Being Resourceful

Two core elements within the resourceful group will be explored here. Firstly, making conscious connections. This element encourages you to reflect on the analogy of 'who is holding your rope?' Encourage students to imagine their life as a rope, with them in the centre and those in their life holding onto it. They should ask themselves: are they helping me move forward or holding me back? They choose who holds their rope and how tightly and should consider letting go of those who hinder

their progress. As individuals transition from school to other paths there will be new arrivals on their rope and long-standing influencers will no longer be present, making it a vital moment with potentially long-lasting consequences. One strategy is for students to reflect on the path those closest to them are on: is this a direction they are comfortable travelling too? The answer to this should determine how tightly they get to hold their rope.

Secondly, being time-sensitive, which is not to be confused with simply being on time. We all have 24 hours in a day and can consider this as 24 1-hour tokens. As students move to university or another pathway their time tokens become almost entirely their own to choose from. Some courses do take registers and require a certain level of attendance, but not all. Timekeeping is more structured if they go on to do an apprenticeship or move into employment. Therefore, time can be seen as an incredible asset that must be directed wisely, as once time is spent, it can never be returned.

Being Impactful

Developing effective systems for productivity and impact rely on being intensely and intently active. This can lead to considerable growth as individuals enter this new stage of their lives where they can build the habits that make development inevitable. Author James Clear (2018) is a tremendous advocate for developing impactful habits and he comments that you need to keep your daily actions small, strive to get 1% better every day, keep your daily mindset big, and think about how these small daily actions are contributing towards a bigger goal.

Improving your habits isn't always about doing more, or saying yes to everything; there is great value in saying no, and saying it quickly and without regret. If you cannot say no, 'say yes, but...' and set your own terms too. As already mentioned, time and attention are precious, and they need to be used intently.

Being Courageous

Owning our choices is central in being courageous, although it is an often-overlooked component of personal growth. Underpinning this is the idea that whilst we cannot always control what happens to us, we can control how we feel about what happens to us. This peace of mind can be particularly valuable in turbulent moments in life, for example when moving into a completely new learning environment.

When we work hard for something we do not believe in, it can cause stress. When we work hard for something we love, it can be called passion. The tension here is that there is not a clear border between the two and it often takes courage to continue down a path that becomes stressful. The connected tension is that students need to make choices and the more difficult decisions they make, often to endure the discomfort that comes with the stress of working on things they do not like, the more their life will move forwards.

Further research has suggested that developing self-leadership can help develop creativity, innovation, and self-efficacy (Amundsen and Martinsen, 2014), indicating that self-leadership may become an explicit factor to be trained and taught to creative professionals and innovators of the future (Goldsby, Goldsby, Neck, Neck and Mathews, 2021). Additionally, Furtner, Rauthmann and Sachse (2011) reported that self-leadership is a process for improving socio-emotional intelligence, in that awareness and regulation of one's emotional state is better enhanced by a person who takes accountability of their thoughts and behaviours. With this in mind self-leadership can be valuable for students to excel in the classroom and prepare them for their future careers (Goldsby et al., 2021).

In conclusion, in this article I have shared several key elements of self-leadership that will support students transitioning beyond school, and some related areas it can help develop. If individuals can be resourceful by being aware of the importance of time and the relationships they form, as well as having an eye for impact, and own their choices with courage, they will be much more likely to transition successfully and start the next stages of their journey with purpose.

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